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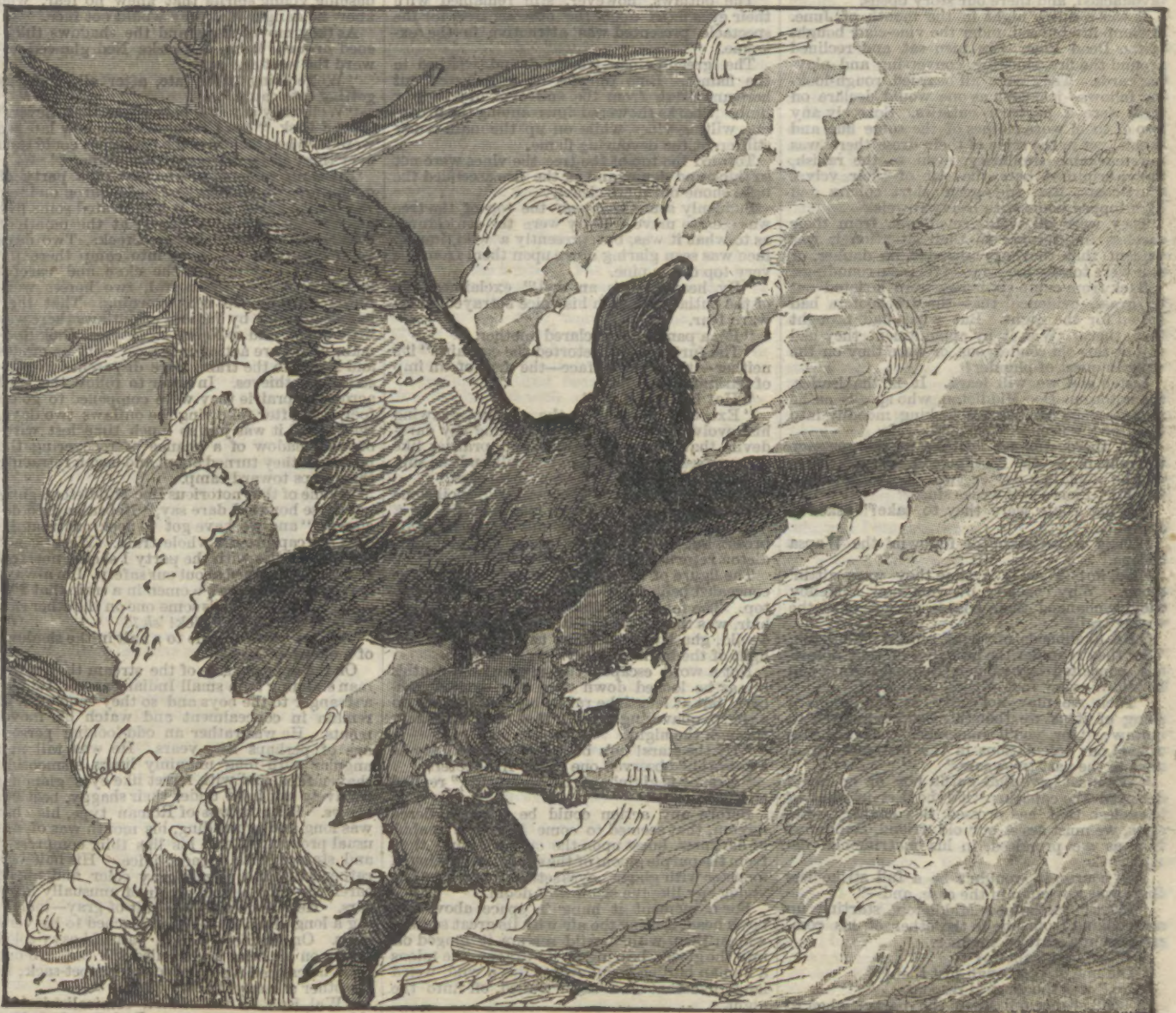
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No. 153.

EAGLE KIT, THE BOY DEMON; or, The Outlaws of the Gold Hills.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "KEEN-KNIFE," "LASSO JACK," "SCAR-FACE SAUL," ETC., ETC.



WITH A WILD SCREAM IT LUNGED OFF INTO THE GLOOM, BEARING IN ITS DRAGON-LIKE TALONS A HUMAN BURDEN FROM WHOSE LIPS A WILD, WEIRD LAUGH LIKE THAT OF A SATYR TRAILED OFF INTO THE NIGHT.

Eagle Kit, THE BOY DEMON;

OR,
The Outlaws of the Gold Hills.

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CHAPTER I.

THE MEETING AT LONE PINE.

UPON the head-waters of the Big Cheyenne river, and under the sullen brow of the foothills of the great mountains stood a lone pine tree which had become known thereabouts as "The Dead Pine." There was nothing particularly noticeable in this tree more than in any other dead pine, but it had become designated the "Dead Pine," from the fact that it stood upon historic ground and at the converging-point of three or four different trails that threaded the sinuous windings and darksome valleys of the great hills. There, in times past, had the Indian chiefs of the north-western tribes met in council to smoke the pipe of peace or plot and plan bloody treachery; there had the white freebooter and the red marauder sealed their compact to rob and murder; there had many a hunter or trapper watched the lonely night away; there had many a weary gold-hunter rested, slept and dreamed of wealth and power; there had the soldiery of the nation bivouacked, and there our story opens.

It was a sultry night in the month of June. A camp-fire burned under the vine-clad boughs of the Dead Pine. Six men sat and reclined around the fire, smoking, conversing and playing cards. They were all bearded, rough-looking fellows—just such as one would declare on sight were a party of outlaws. Scarcely any two of them wore clothes of the same hue and fabric, yet in the style of their dress there was a remarkable similarity, even to the rakish, broad-brimmed hats, the cut of their velvet short-coats, the wide-open shirt collars and high-topped boots with heavy rowels.

They were all well armed, yet from their careless indifference to their situation it was evident that they apprehended no danger, or else were totally ignorant of their surroundings.

Back from camp six horses were lariatd out to grass, evidence that the freebooters had halted for the night. But what had brought them there? Was it by appointment they had met at this old rendezvous, or were they on the wing in quest of plunder?

Listen and we will learn. It is the leader, the notorious Doc Middleton, who speaks as he reclines upon his blanket looking moodily into the glowing fire.

"If there was no mistake in the message brought in by the last pigeon, Baron's train will be along in a day or two. Let's see; they left Fort Pierre two weeks since."

"What route were they to take?" asked a comrade.

"They were talkin' of followin' the Wapsa Shienaa."

"So, ho! Then it is time they were gittin' along. Why, they're overdue now. Mebbe they've changed their course, or got onto the wrong trail?"

"No likelihoods of that," replied Middleton, "for they're under the guidance of that notorious, conceited boy-ranger, Nebraska Ned, and he knows every foot of these prairies."

"Then we may not have as unanimous a thing of it as we thought, Doc," remarked an outlaw; "for you'll remember that boy has nipped our calculations in the bud more than once in the past two years."

"We must have that outfit, boy or no boy," declared the captain; "it's the best in point of horseflesh that has crossed this country. Besides, we must assist our old friend, Handsome Dan, as we promised, in his matrimonial designs."

"Of course, it wouldn't be a full strike 'less there was a woman in the case, and—"

"Hark!" exclaimed Middleton, starting up and looking from one to the other of his companions in a startled manner.

"What's up, captain?"

"Did one of you cough just then?"

"No," was the general response.

A dead silence fell upon the party; when to their ears came the half-smothered "te-chew! te-chew!" of something over their heads.

In a moment every man was upon his feet

with his eyes uplifted searching the Dead Pine. But the long, dead limbs being thick and hung and overspread with an impenetrable festoon of green vines, they were unable to see any living thing through the darkness and density of the parasites that enshrouded the tree as if to protect its nakedness from sun and storm.

"Ha! ha!" laughed an outlaw, "we're surely gittin' nervous, boys; it weren't nothin' but a bat or a chipmunk sneezin' at us."

"Chipmunk or bat, baboon or angel," exclaimed the captain, "it's got to come down and show itself, even though it be at the cost of the Dead Pine."

As he spoke the freebooter took a firebrand, and, laying it against the foot of the tree, kindled it into a glowing blaze, and then stood back to await the result.

The surface of the pine being coated with a pitchy exudation, that had been hardened by exposure to sun and wind, the flame seized hold of it with fierce avidity, and like a serpent began to encircle and creep up the tree, snapping and crackling under the green vines and sending up a dense volume of black smoke into the inky sky.

Ten feet from the ground a number of limbs put out from the main trunk of the tree. These the fire soon reached and seized upon, and soon a dozen tongues of flame were darting out through the green festoonery—shimmering and sparkling through the interstices like a gorgeous Chinese lantern—glittering and glowing as if a million of fireflies were tangled in the dark green meshes of ivy and morning-glory.

Half of the lower portion of the tree was soon in flames, still no living creature could be seen.

The outlaws, however, still remained with their eyes fixed upon the burning tree, for the spectacle presented was attractive in the extreme.

The green vines trembled and writhed in the flames. Blue tongues of fire darted out here and there from the end of a dry twig or limb. Sparks showered down among the drooping, wilting vines, while on up the main trunk still crept the devouring flame.

Toward the top of the tree the vines were not so thick and dense, and as the fire ascended the light shone out more clearly.

Suddenly something near the top of the tree was seen to move. Many were the conjectures as to what it was, but presently a wild, impish face was seen glaring down upon them from the very top of the pine.

"By heavens! it's an owl!" exclaimed one of the outlaws, though his voice betrayed an inward fear.

"It's a panther!" declared another.

"The furies, men," retorted the captain, "it's neither—it's a human face—the face of an imp of darkness!"

"Ho! ho! a spy, eh?"

"Exactly," responded the captain, drawing his revolver, "it's one of those young boy dare-devils that haunt these hills and prairies like an accursed pestilence; but I will end the subject with that impish-looking little cuss."

"Hold, captain, don't shoot; you'll spoil some rare sport. The fire 'll soon fetch him."

"I'm impatient to wrest our secret from his breast, but then he cannot escape us," and Middleton returned his revolver to its holster.

The figure of the spy was so small that it was concealed behind the slender trunk of the tree-top. The face, wreathed in a mass of tangled hair, was that of a boy—it was a face that wore a wild, ghastly appearance as revealed in the light of the burning pine.

Not a word escaped the mysterious youth's lips as he looked down upon the excited robbers; but at length he raised his eyes and set up a sharp, quavering whistle that rung strangely through the night.

"By the stars! he's beginnin' to pipe lusty as a katydid," observed one of the freebooters.

"Yes, or is givin' a signal to friends," replied another.

Before any action could be taken a fierce scream, that seemed to come from the realms of darkness, burst upon the outlaws' ears; then from the purple gloom of the sky, a great winged monster with glaring eyes settled down over the young spy like the shadow of doom.

For a moment it hung in space above the boy's head, beating the air with its great somber wings; then, with a wild scream it lunged off into the gloom, bearing in its dragon-like talons a human burden from whose lips a wild, weird laugh like that of a satyr trailed off into the night.

All this had transpired in so brief a space of time, that, ere the startled freebooters had recovered from their consternation, the mysterious

boy was gone from the tree-borne away on what to them seemed a demon's wings.

"Gods of fable!" burst from the lips of the outlaw leader, "do my senses deceive me?"

"I reckon not, captain; I think we have all looked upon a pair of demons of darkness."

"Boys," said the captain in a tone that betrayed great seriousness, "you have all heard the Indians' story of the Boy Demon of these hills, have you not?"

"Ay, ay, captain," replied a companion, "not only have I heard the story, but I have looked upon the elfish face of the Boy Demon, and seen him borne away upon vampire wings!"

CHAPTER II.

HAIL FELLOWS WELL MET.

ONLY a few faint shafts of quivering light still lingered above the distant mountain peaks. Twilight shadows were gathering in the valleys and deepening in the woods bordering Beaver Creek, a tributary of the Big Cheyenne. Those mysterious voices so peculiar to the forest after nightfall had begun their weird and melancholy song, but above them all the sound of human voices in conversation might have been heard.

Two persons were moving rapidly down Beaver Creek.

Both were young men—in fact, mere boys. Neither was over eighteen. They were dressed in buckskin suits in the style of the border ranger. Both were well armed with rifle, pistols and knife.

One of these youths was the noted boy ranger, Nebraska Ned; the other his friend and companion, Dick Rodman. Both were fine specimens of physical manhood, rather prepossessing—free, dashing young spirits that knew no fear, who knew no danger that they would not face.

As they moved along and the shadows thickened around them, Nebraska Ned glanced toward the west and said:

"We're going to be late, after all, Dick, in getting into camp."

"Well, they say it is better late than never," replied Dick, "but I shouldn't care how late we were if, when we did reach camp, we could turn over those stolen horses to their owners."

The camp referred to was that of a party of gold-hunters under Major Daniel Baron on their way to the Black Hills; it was located some five miles further down the Beaver at the mouth of a little stream called Honey Creek. Two days before the train had gone into camp there for the night, and despite the close and careful watch kept over the corral, two horses were found missing the next morning. That they had been stolen by Indians or outlaws there was little doubt, and so Nebraska Ned and Dick Rodman, who were acting in the capacity of guides and scouts to the train, were dispatched in pursuit of the thieves. In order to follow the trail across the prairie they were compelled to go on foot, but, after following the outlaws two days, they found it was just so much time lost without the shadow of a chance of recovering the horses, so they turned about and began retracing their steps toward camp.

Some of that notorious Doc Middleton's gang got those horses, I dare say," Nebraska Ned declared, "and we have got to look out that he does not capture the whole train. Were it not for those ladies with the party I should not feel so much concerned about our safety. I'm always nervous when there's women in a train that I've charge of—ah! there's some one on the other side of the creek! Stop, Dick! 'sh!'"

The two youths came to a halt in the shadows of a clump of trees.

On the opposite side of the stream they saw a man standing by a small Indian canoe. He was a stranger to the boys and so they concluded to remain in concealment and watch his movements. He was rather an odd-looking personage of perhaps fifty years. He was tall and angular with long ungainly limbs, a smoothly shaven face, and with ferret like eyes glancing furtively out from under their shaggy, beetling brows. His nose was of Roman type, his chin was long and protruding, his mouth was of unusual proportion, and his lips thin, compressed and stained with tobacco-juice. His hair was rather long, of a grizzly-gray color and tossed carelessly back behind a pair of unusually large ears. He was dressed in a suit of gray—including a long linen duster that reached to his very heels. On his feet were a pair of heavy-soled shoes; on his head was a soiled silk tie. In one hand he carried a gaunt-looking carpet-sack; in the other a heavy, knotty cane.

"Wal, isn't he the oddest, comicalist-lookin' old rooster you ever saw, Dick?" asked Ned when they had regarded the stranger's general appearance.

"Blowed if he isn't an outlandish lookin' old seed," responded Dick; "but, see, he's goin' to launch that canoe and I expect he'll come over on this side."

True enough the old stranger pushed the canoe into the water and then taking up his cane and carpet-sack was in the act of stepping into the craft, when another man glided from the bushes behind and seizing him by the shoulders, exclaimed:

"No you don't, stranger; that's my boat."

The old man started as if a bomb-shell had exploded by his ear, and without turning his body he glanced back over his shoulder, and with glaring eyes stared the man in the face for full a minute before he spoke. Then as a scowl settled upon his brow, he drawled out in a slow, contemptuous manner:

"Wal now, what are you?"

"I, sir, am Professor Carl Jimrack, astronomer, geologist and naturalist," was the response; "now who be you?"

"Judge Zelotes Prosper, from the State of Car'lina."

"Hail fellows well met," whispered Ned to his friend; "I'll bet both lied like pirates about their names and profession, for they look more like river dead-beats than judge and professor."

Professor Jimrack was the opposite of Judge Prosper in form and looks. He was short and stout built, with a round fat face, a ruddy complexion, a corpulent form, and a pair of eyes that looked mischievously cold and scrutinizingly through their half-closed lids.

After the judge had made himself known, Jimrack said in disdainful tone:

"Then, sir, I'd have the court understand that she's out of both her longitude and latitude when she undertakes to steal my boat."

"See here, stranger," retorted the judge from Car'lina flying into a passion; "you don't want to tramp on my toes or by the sword of Damocles I'll bounce you quicker'n a hound pup can lick a skillet. I've been judge o' Car'lina too long to let a little, ole pussy cuss like you stand up an' accuse this 'ere court o' bein' subsidized. Perfessor, the oleanders and oranges bloom annually over the graves of a dozen men that undertook to tamper with the judicial rooster, and as this is our fust meetin', and as we may meet ag'in, I warn ye to tread keefully. I am up here for recreation—to tune up the judicial bench o' Car'lina in the stiff, wholesome air o' Dakota. I don't want to damage anybody, but if I'm crowded and riled up, I'm worse than a nest o' moccasin snakes and I'll fight; that's the kind o' a star I be, perfessor."

"Yes, yes; a star of lesser magnitude—a sort of a fly-speck—a blot on humanity's sky, as it were," replied Jimrack.

"Perfessor, you aggravate the court—that's clear contempt—you want to peel that back, or, by the sword of Damocles! I'll show your scientific eyes a cluster o' stars that beats the nebular theory all outen the solar system. I are a war-hoss, sir, sich as never smelt the smoke o' battle afar, for I are always in the smoke on the ground, and though we're here alone in this Dakotian forest, by the shaddo' of the palmetto, I'll issue an injunction against your impertinence and erect a Corinthian column over them sleepy, turtle eyes o' yours that you'll—"

His words were interrupted by a stinging blow in the face from the fist of the professor, that sent him reeling backward several paces; but, recovering his equilibrium, he uttered an imprecation, lunged forward and returned the professor's compliment in a blow with his sledge-hammer fist that sounded clear across the creek.

This was the signal for a "mill," and for fully a minute the two comical, whimsical old strangers stood up and pounded each other in a lively and somewhat scientific manner.

To the boys under cover on the opposite side of the creek it was the most amusing and ludicrous affair they had ever witnessed; but when they saw the men were in dead earnest, and that their encounter threatened a serious result over a trifling matter, Nebraska Ned suggested the propriety of interfering and separating them. But at this very juncture—before the boys could stir from their tracks—a rifle on their side of the creek rung out, and Judge Zelotes Prosper uttered a groan and sunk at the feet of his adversary—shot down by an unseen foe!

"My Lord!" cried Nebraska Ned; "murderers are near! It must be Injuns or outlaws! Come, Dick, let us avenge the death of that strange old man, whoever and whatever he may have been."

The two young rangers glided from their covert in the direction whence the shot had

come, but before they had turned to go they saw Professor Jimrack turn and flee into the woods as if pursued by a demon, leaving the body of his late enemy lying prostrate upon the white sand.

By this time it was nearly dusk. The boys were compelled to exert the utmost care and caution for fear of running into ambushed danger. They had proceeded but a short way, however, when suddenly a horseman dashed past them at a rapid pace, going west.

"There goes the assassin!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yes, Dick; did you recognize his face?"

"I did not."

"Well, I did, and it bears the evidence of guilt; but, good God! can it be possible that that man has committed a murder? Dick, there's a mystery 'bout this; we must go back and find out who that dead man is, for I don't believe he gave his true name."

"Neither do I, Ned; but I can't imagine who that murderer could be."

"It was"—and Ned whispered the name in his companion's ear, as if afraid to speak it aloud.

The boys returned to the creek, crossed over on some driftwood and hurried back to the scene of the late pugilistic encounter; but to their surprise and disappointment the body of Judge Prosper was gone! There were blood-stains on the white sand, and a plain trail showing where the body had been dragged away into the woods by some one whose tracks had been concealed by dragging the dead body over them.

The young rangers looked at each other in astonishment.

"This beats me, Dick, all out of time," said Ned; "but I reckon that professor come back and dragged Prosper into the woods in order to rifle his body. The chances are, however strange it may seem, that the assassin and old Jimrack are in league, and that they have hounded this old man to his death. The disappearance of those horses from our corral may be a part of the scheme to effect this murder. Dick, I can't give this matter up till I know more about it. Come, let us search the woods for Prosper's body, and if we should run across Jimrack, make him give an account of himself."

They turned into the woods and began the search. It was now so dark that they could follow no trail. They wandered cautiously up and down the creek—all the while kept working back into the timber. For two hours they kept up the search but could see or hear nothing of the dead or living. Their labors seemed a hopeless task, and they were upon the point of giving up the search when they discovered the faint glow of a light behind some bushes in under a high, projecting bluff.

They listened and heard voices in conversation, interlarded with an occasional low, suppressed laugh.

"We must know who are there, Dick," said Ned.

Upon their hands and knees the boys crept noiselessly through the shrubbery until they reached the curtain of vines that separated them from the unknown.

Putting out his hand Ned quietly rushed the green drapery aside and looked through upon a scene that surprised and startled him.

He saw two men seated under a projecting ledge engaged in a desultory conversation. A half empty bottle sat between them. The eye of one was bandaged with a red silk handkerchief. The face of the other was black and swollen almost to hideousness. But, notwithstanding the battered condition of these two men's faces, Ned recognized the one with the bandage as Judge Zelotes Prosper, well and alive, and the other, Professor Jimrack—to all appearances the warmest of friends!

The young rangers were astounded by this discovery. It deepened the mystery which seemed to surround these two strange men and their still stranger conduct.

CHAPTER III.

LOST IN THE FOG.

"Oh, heavens, help me!"

This appeal came from the lips of a young girl who sat upon her horse in the heart of a great prairie, the picture of hopeless despair.

A dense black fog hung over and around her. The sun was obscured as if by the shadow of desolation. A silence that seemed born of the tomb was in perfect keeping with the gloom.

All day the heavens had been filled with a darksome mist and in a moment's time almost—without the least warning—it had settled around the fair Mabel Vane and shut off all view of the surrounding plain, even concealing

the camp of her friends from her bewildered gaze; and as she was following no trail, and as she had paid no attention to her course—being but a few minutes ride from camp—she found herself lost in the dreary, impenetrable fog.

She called aloud to her friends but no voice answered. She turned her horse's head and rode away in the direction that she believed would take her into camp. She rode on for more than an hour, but disappointment stared her continually in the face.

The solitude of the plain and the density of the fog seemed to increase every moment. The poor girl's heart sunk heavy in her breast and in despair she gave up all hopes of ever finding her friends. She finally drew rein and sent up a fervent appeal for Heaven's guidance. Her sagacious horse seemed imbued with her own sad spirit. It pricked up its ears, sniffed the air and pawed the earth with uneasiness and impatience.

"Oh, why do they not signal to me?" the maiden at length burst forth in the bitterness of her despair; "I shall die here in this dreary, dreadful fog. Oh, how foolish I was to venture away from camp at all! Poor papa! he will be distracted! This fog is growing thicker and darker every moment, I know! it must be night is approaching, and oh, may the—"

Her lamentations were here interrupted by a sound like that of some one whistling. She bent her head and listened. A light of hope flashed in her great brown eyes. Her horse turned his head and listened too.

From out the fog came the joyful sound of a merry, boyish whistle, and a moment later a diminutive human figure emerged from the gloom. It was the figure of a boy clad in a close-fitting suit of buckskin and carrying a tiny rifle.

At sight of the fair Mabel Vane, the lad stopped short in manifest surprise and stared at her with his big black eyes as though confronted by an apparition.

Mabel returned the look with equal surprise, for never in her life had she looked upon such a small specimen of humanity assuming such manly importance. From his appearance he must have been sixteen or seventeen years of age; yet it was evident to Mabel that he was a human dwarf—not deformed or repulsive as most of those unfortunate beings are, but perfect in form and limb, with a handsome, roguish boyish face. He had a healthy, hearty look; his movements were as easy, agile and graceful as those of a young panther, and it was evident that he possessed the strength and endurance of a young bear.

"Whew!" the little fellow whistled, as he dropped the butt of his gun to the ground and struck an attitude of tragic surprise; "who under the hidden sun have we here?"

"My name is Mabel Vane," the maiden responded, her heart in a flutter of excitement; "and I am lost on this prairie. I do hope you can set me right so that I can find my friends."

"Where do you b'long, Miss Mabel Vane?" the boy asked, advancing a little closer.

"Our camp is at the mouth of Honey Creek," she replied; "I left camp for a few minutes, ride, and I am sure I was not a quarter of a mile from camp when this fog descended; but I had not noticed the way I had come, and so I have been riding and riding and can't find my friends."

"Whirlwinds and bats, girl!" the little fellow exclaimed, "you're more'n ten miles from Honey Creek, but as I am bound for that holy spot, come along and I will see that you're landed safe in your friends' camp. I s'pose it's Major Dan Baron's train you b'long to?"

"Yes, sir; but may I ask your name?"

"Oh, you can call me Kit—Eagle Kit's what most of 'em call me, but then it don't make much difference what I'm called, for I'm a sort of a knot of insignificance—a kind of a human wart—a wild, battish sort of a boy that don't give a flash of sunshine for the biggest outlaw that rides these prairies."

"I think I have heard Major Baron speak of Eagle Kit," said Mabel; "and I think you do yourself injustice. Where do you reside?"

"Up in a hole, called the Erie, on a mountain peak. I live there with an old Injin called Macomah. The eagles, and the owls, and the mountain goats are my companions, and I expect I begin to look eagle owl-goatish, but, if I do say it, miss, I'm boss on the shoot and can jist jay King David in the shade throwing a stone—Hullo! there comes a hossman! Reckon it's one o' your friends huntin' you."

True enough, a horseman rode out from the gloom that hung over the plain toward them. He was mounted upon a mustang pony, dressed

in a sort of a military overcoat, high-topped boots and slouched hat.

"He's a stranger," replied Mabel, a feeling of uneasiness stealing over her, at sight of the tough, brigandish-looking horseman.

The man rode up to where the girl and boy stood, drew rein, politely lifted his hat and spoke to Mabel, then turned his eyes and shot a fierce contemptuous look at Eagle Kit.

"Fair girl," the stranger then said, "what means your meeting here with that imp of darkness—that Dwarf Demon?"

The man's looks, his tone, and his very words struck terror to Mabel's heart. In a faltering tone she replied:

"Our meeting was accidental."

"Indeed! Then my meeting with you, fair girl, is providential; and with you too, Boy Demon!" said the man, fairly hissing the last words between his set teeth.

"You're an outlaw! you're an outlaw!" shrieked Eagle Kit in a wild, piercing voice, and, quick as a flash, he raised his rifle and cocked it; but the man was on the alert, and whipping out a revolver leveled it upon the boy.

Together pistol and rifle rung out on the dismal air. A cry burst from the boy's lips and he sunk at the feet of Mabel's horse, while, from the lips of the man rung a demoniac laugh as he reeled in his saddle as though stunned, and clasped his hand to his temple across which ran the red track of the boy's bullet.

A cry of terror burst from Mabel's lips, and she turned her horse to flee, but before she had gone a hundred yards, the outlaw, who had been but slightly wounded, dashed alongside of her, and seizing her horse's reins, said:

"You must go with me, miss."

"With you? where?" cried Mabel.

"To the mountains yonder—this way."

"I will not! I will not!" shrieked Mabel.

"Oh, but you must, though! The death of that Dwarf Demon will not compensate me for the days that I have been here watching for him on this prairie. You're better off with me than to have been led off to the den of that imp, for I tell you he is half devil."

Mabel Vane heard but little of the murderous scoundrel's talk, for, half unconscious, her brain paralyzed with terror, she sat upon her horse unable to move, unable to speak, while the outlaw, leading her horse, turned and rode away.

It was some time before the maiden could fully realize her situation—that she was really a captive in the power of Eagle Kit's murderer. Then her brain grew dizzy and her heart sickened. She would have fallen from her saddle but for the support of the outlaw's hand. And through all this dreadful trial the bright, joyful and happy face of the manly little Kit, as it looked up at her from the tall grass so full of boyish pride, was before her; and in her mind she now pictured that same bright face, ghastly in death, staring up into the gloomy sky with no friendly hand to close the lids over those big black eyes—no friendly hand to give the little body sepulture.

Thoughts of escape never entered Mabel's mind. She rode along with downcast eye, taking no note of anything around her. She was like one in a stupor.

In the course of two or three hours the fog finally lifted, and gathering into clouds broke asunder and let the rays of the declining sun fall upon the face of outlaw and captive. The light seemed to revive the maiden's drooping spirit. She raised her eyes and looked around. A sigh escaped her lips. She felt that she had looked for the last time upon the great green prairie. She had a presentiment of death—of a living tomb.

Before them not far away she saw the mountain range clearly outlined against the pale red sky. Behind them an interminable prairie stretched back into the twilight shadows of the coming night.

The situation was a sad one indeed for poor Mabel: the mountains before them promised the outlaw a refuge, and her prison.

The sun at length went down behind the mountain range; the shadows of evening added new horrors to the soul of Mabel Vane; but swiftly and in silence they rode on, to, at length, enter a dark valley in the foot-hills that gradually narrowed and deepened into a black defile.

Through this desolate pass they were making their way; the sound of their animals' hoofs on the stony way gave back ghostly, hollow echoes. Nocturnal wings whistled and whirled overhead. Strange voices seemed to be calling to each other from the hills in the distance; but amid all those strange sounds of night a shrill, sharp voice suddenly rung out clear and startling:

"Halt, there!"

The demand came from before the outlaw and his captive.

They involuntarily drew rein. The freebooter grasped his revolver in a nervous hand.

A slight form glided out from behind a rock into the defile before them.

"Eagle Kit!" burst from Mabel's lips, for dark as it was, she recognized the little fellow in flesh and spirit.

"The Boy Demon!" cried the outlaw.

Then the double report of fire-arms rung out upon the night and rolled and crashed through the hills in thunderous reverberations, while, from the hills above, a wild maniac scream came trailing down to the ears of Mabel Vane followed by a sound as if of great, hollow wings beating the pliant air or buffeting the shadows of death.

With this moment of terror, unconsciousness came to the relief of the maiden's brain, and she fell fainting from the saddle in the presence of death.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOY RANGERS' NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

We left Nebraska Ned and Dick Rodman, the Boy Rangers, watching the movements of the mysterious Judge Prosper and Professor Jimrack. The youths found themselves in a quandary as to what they should do—whether continue their watch, make their presence known, or steal quietly away and resume their journey; but, while revolving the subject in their minds Prosper and Jimrack took a drink from the bottle that sat between them and then stretched themselves out before the fire and became silent. They had evidently "turned in" for the night. They occupied positions on opposite sides of the fire, and, although both appeared to pass off into a quiet slumber at once, the boys could see that neither one was asleep. Every few minutes Prosper would half-open his unguarded eye and steal a glance at the motionless Jimrack, and presently Jimrack would peer from the folds of his blanket at the "Judge."

From these movements it was quite evident that the two men had not, by any means, perfect confidence in each other yet.

Prosper began to snore in a manner that was indicative of unfeigned slumber, and a few moments later Jimrack rose to a sitting posture, then to his feet and, casting a glance around him, stole quietly away into the darkness.

Presently Prosper started from his sleep and finding his companion gone, gave utterance to an imprecation unbecoming the moral dignity of a judge.

This seemed a favorable moment for the Boy Rangers to introduce themselves to the redoubtable Zelotes Prosper, and rising to their feet they pressed their way through the foliage and confronted him, hats in hand.

"By the jumpin' General Jackson!" burst from the astounded man's lips, as he raised the bandage from his eye as if to aid the right, "has my companion, Perfessor Jimrack, dissolved into a pair of young bucks?"

"No, sir," replied Ned with a smile, "your friend left before we appeared; we saw him steal away 'bout ten minutes ago."

"Vampire sap that man! He's the dam-aged old Gordian Knot I ever un'took to wrassel with, and if he trifles much more with me I'll pound the daylight outen him quicker nor a hound pup can dress a skillet. But, lookey here, my young kids, give an account o' yerselves. Might either of you be Nubrasca Ned, the Boy Ranger?"

"That's who I am," responded Ned.

"Sword of Damocles!" you are the very cat-tapillar I seeketh—put her there, boy, and have the distinguished honor o' shakin' the hand o' Judge Zelotes Prosper o' Car'lina. Ha! ha! ha! you d—imp'd little prairie bot, whar ye been keepin' yerself?"

"Been looking after you ever since that unseen foe shot you down on the bank of the creek this evening."

"Hepsidam! then you see'd that?"

"Yes—also, your meeting and trouble with Jimrack."

"Don't mention that affair; it war a disgrace to the jurisprudence of the nation; but then, by the sword of Damocles, I'll fight like a royal, Bengal imp of darkness afore dirt can be dashed in my peepers. The Prospers are a family of fighters as well as scholars. The oleanders and oranges bloom annually over the graves of a dozen fellers that tried to come contempt upon this court. No, sir, they can't enny of 'em climb this judicial rooster. But, boy, what d'ye

think of the helletrope that attempted to shoot me? D'ye think it war Ingin or outlaw?"

"Neither, judge," replied Ned, "but I did think it was some one in league with Jimrack."

"Alligators and moccasins! that couldn't be, Ned, I reckon; for, it war old Jim, himself, that pulled me off into the woods and seen' I war only stunned by the assassin's bullet, poured some of his liquid regenerator down my throat and in a little while I pulled into land again. Then we come off here, built a fire, had a social chat—a drink from his bottle—then a ditto, and then to bed. But he's gone, that's sure, and mobby the pussy old bloat 'll come 'round in time; if he don't, put it down that you're right and Perfesser Jimrack is a treasonable, treacherous old reprobate. But say, Ned, d'ye know I've been wantin' to see you?"

"You intimated as much awhile ago."

"Well, it's a fact, and now that we've met I want to tell you what I want, and then you can tell me whether I can have it or not."

"Very well; go on," and the three seated themselves by the fire. Fixing his lone eye on Ned, Prosper began:

"Six months ago, John Henry Grayson died—died in—well, he died that's certain. Before he passed the rubicon of life he called a friend of his (so I am told, now mind ye), one Colonel Gamaliel Blower, to his bedside, and told him he'd been a little wild-oaty in the past—that he'd not alers done a regular daylight, Sunday business, and therefore wanted to unload his breast of his sins for fear he'd swamp gittin' over the Jordan with sich a cargo aboard. So he went on and told all his wrong-doings and good-doings to Colonel Blower, but I'll jist narrate that as what'll be pertinent to our case."

"Fifteen years before he died, John Henry Grayson went West, and everybody's posed he'd gone to California; but it turned out that he war in Sante Fe where he married a beauefeful little gal, with jist Spanish blood enough in her veins to make it a frisky fandango for John Henry. A child was born to them—a pretty, sweet little thing that John H. fairly worshiped, and seeing as what he did, that prickly ash of a wife of his, whose love'd turned to hate, ups and leaves him with the baby, and fled to parts unknown. John Henry hunted the South-West over for his gal-baby but found it not, and so, nightly distracted, he returned to his former home and thirteen years after'ards died, leavin' the snug little fortune of one hundred thousand dollars to his daughter, but if she couldn't be found it was to go to some charitable institution. But here let me impress upon your minds that a few days before J. Henry demised, he heard that his cactus-burr—I mean his wife—had died in Omaha; and so he made a special request that his executor, Colonel Gamaliel Blower, investigate matters, and if his daughter Iona was living, spend half of his fortune to find her and place her in possession of the other. Wal, Blower investigated the matter far enough to ascertain that the dead woman had been living for some years in Dakota, and it is supposed her child, if living, is somewhere here yet. Now, as I war comin' to this country to see the sights and recuperate my health, a friend of mine who war acquainted with John H. Grayson's affairs, writ Colonel Blower 'bout it and told him I war a good, honest judge and would be a good man to help him out. So Blower writ me a letter and asked me to assist him, saying the finder of the gal'd git one thousand dollars. Now, I never saw Colonel Blower, but we arranged by letter to meet at Fort Scully the last of this month. You see I'm several days ahead of time, but I thought I'd go to lookin' around a little afore the colonel come, and if I should find the gal, I'd come in for the hull reward. I don't want ye to think I'd take any advantage of the colonel—I'd die first—it'd be unbecomin' in a judge. But to business: now, hearin' as what you're the boss vagabond of these prairies, I thought as what you might know of some stray gal, or at least help me hunt her up. Of course, she's either living with the Ingins, or some white hunters or settlers, if she's living in Dakota at all. Now, what do ye know?"

"Well, I know a few girls here and there in Dakota, but I couldn't, for the life of me, say whether your girl is among my acquaintances," answered Ned; "and, as to helping you in your search, I can't at present. I already have on hand the job of taking Major Baron's train through to the Black Hills. Even now the train awaits our coming, not over five miles away, and I assure you we must be moving."

"Well, I believe I'll go with you, and still I hate to go off and leave Jimrack. But then the dam-aged old shad-belly had no compunction 'bout leavin' me like an Arab, and so I guess

"I'll go with you, and put Jimrack down as a boss fraud."

"All right, judge; come along," and they all started rapidly down the Beaver. The night was dark, yet the way was perfectly familiar to Ned.

They were nearing their destination, when the report of fire-arms fell upon their ears. It came from the direction of the gold-hunters' camp.

"I am afraid the folks are in trouble," Ned had to confess.

"It sounds a little warish down there," added the judge, "but I thought the Ingins were on a peace-footin', hereaways?"

"They are in one sense of the word, but there are a few outlawed Ingins hidin' away in the mountains and consortin' with white outlaws and robbers, and with them go hand in hand in robbin' and plunderin' the unprotected. Doc Middleton's gang are now operatin' in this part of the country."

"I'll put an injunction on their breathin' apparatuses if they come within the jurisdiction of my court," observed the judge. "I'm a dreadful ugly mess for a violator of the law to stumble against. Why, boys, the oranges and oleanders bloom annually over the mounds of twenty men who saw fit to buck against the mandates o' this judicial rooster."

The three moved on and soon came in sight of the camp, or rather the glow of the camp-fire, for the camp had been located in a dry swale, or what is more properly termed a "buffalo wallow," so deep that only the tops of the tilted wagons could be seen above the level of the plain. One end of this depression terminated at the very brink of the waters of Honey Creek. It was about a hundred rods to the edge of the nearest timber.

There was a silence hanging over the camp that to Ned seemed like the suspense of overshadowing danger, and creeping around to where he could obtain a view of the interior of the camp, he saw enough at a glance to convince that there was something wrong—that the camp was in a state of siege, although an enemy could not be seen. He saw the horses and mules were all corralled inside of the wallow, and that the wagons were arranged so as to afford a means of defense.

"There's trouble afloat, friends," whispered the young ranger, "and we may have no little difficulty gettin' into camp. I feel confident Ingins and outlaws are lying around the wallow, guardin' every approach and waitin' for a favorable moment to strike. But I'm goin' to crawl into camp if it costs me my life."

"And when you're safely there," added Dick Rodman, "I'll follow suit."

"You will have to be very careful, judge," warned Ned; "if you are not accustomed to Ingins' cunning and border dangers, I'd advise you to remain under cover of the woods until you can enter camp with some degree of safety."

"Don't let my safety worry you, Ned; this court knows herself like a book. She's faced alligators, and moccasin snakes, and swamp angels, and knows no dangers, and knuckles down to no outlaw that carries a crime on his soul or a pistol in his belt. The oranges and oleanders bloom yearly over the dumping-grounds of more than a score of sinful varlets that undertook to kick against this dispenser of justice. No, no, boys, don't worry 'bout me; go ahead and tell yer folks that Judge Zelotes Prosper, o' Car'lina, 'll come boom'n' along after while like a team of speckled alligators in a cane-brake."

Ned left his friends and crept cautiously down to the creek and then under cover of its bank he reached the mouth of the "buffalo wallow" and the camp of his friends in safety.

A shout of joy greeted his return; but, sad and terrible indeed was the news, to him, that Mabel Vane was missing—that she had gone riding that day and had not returned, though careful search had been made for her before night set in, and signal guns had been fired every few minutes. Mr. Vane, Mabel's father, felt satisfied she had fallen into the hands of the outlaws who, during the night, had made an attack upon the camp, but had been repulsed for the time being.

In a few minutes Dick Rodman made his appearance in safety. To him Ned broke the news of Mabel's absence as gently as possible, for well Ned knew by Dick's own confession that he loved the pretty little Mabel. Poor Dick was nearly distracted by the news, and it was all Ned could do to restrain him from rushing madly off in search of the maiden.

The Boy Rangers now became eager and anxious for the appearance of Judge Prosper. But

the hours wore on and he did not come. The boys grew uneasy.

Fortunately the robbers did not renew their attack that night. Morning dawned and not a soul, friend or foe, was to be seen outside of the camp.

The continued absence of Judge Prosper called for action on the Boy Rangers' part. They felt it was a duty incumbent upon them to look after the old man, and shouldering their rifles they made their way from the swale and proceeded to where they had left Prosper, the night before. But on arriving there they could find no trace of him whatever. While they stood in a clump of undergrowth, deliberating as to what they should do, they saw a villainous-looking outlaw with a knife between his teeth, creeping toward a low, flat rock whose shelter he was evidently trying to gain, but for what purpose they had no idea. As he was plainly exposed to the boys' gaze, it was evident that their presence was unknown to him, but his movements were so sly and stealthy—the look on his face so murderous that Ned felt satisfied the villain meant mischief to some one, so he resolved to nip the game in the bud; but, just as he raised his rifle to his shoulder, he saw the head and shoulders of a man pop up from the opposite side of the rock the outlaw was trying to gain; he saw the man settle his elbows on the rock and level a pair of glittering little Derringers full upon the outlaw, and then heard him call out:

"Avant, Satan! I have met the enemy and he's mine!"

"Old Judge Prosper, as I live!" whispered Ned, excitedly.

And old Prosper it was, true enough, with his left eye still bandaged, his face bruised and swollen out of shape, his hat tilted back upon his head, occupying a position of the most deliberate coolness and reckless abandon; but the look he fixed upon the outlaw with his lone eye was fierce and deadly.

"Dick," whispered Ned, "just look at that old man; I tell you he's a singed cat. He knows more than we think—he's a mystery."

The outlaw was not only taken by surprise, but at as great a disadvantage as he had intended to take the judge. He was still twenty feet from Prosper, with the rock between them, and upon his knees, not daring to move through fear of invoking certain death from those murderous little derringers.

"Rise up thar, William Riley," commanded old Prosper, "and go along with me! Don't trifle now—I'm ugly as a hungry alligator."

The outlaw rose to his feet.

"Hands up, William!" commanded the judge, and when the outlaw obeyed, he went on: "Now, sir, I'm goin' to disarm you; but fust let me say, if you twitch a muscle I'll plug you quicker nor a bound pup can lick a skillet. I, sir, am Judge Zelotes Prosper, of Car'lina—none o' yer long-haired pilgrims. The oleanders and oranges bloom annually over the graves o' chaps that offered contempt to this court, and I repeat it, that if you bat an eye I'll lift you outen this world with a double-gear'd habes corpus and—Great Hepsidam!"

This exclamation was caused by a yell heard by in the woods, and turning his eye, the judge saw four men in Indian disguise running toward them with tomahawks in hand.

"Quick, Rodman!" exclaimed Ned, seeing their old friend's peril, "quick or the judge is a dead man!"

CHAPTER V.

THE WINGED MESSENGER.

As the echoes from the rifle of Eagle Kit and the pistol of the outlaw rung through the hills, both Mabel Vane and her captor fell from their saddles, the one in a swoon, the other with a bullet through his brain; but, before the body of the maiden had reached the ground the form of the dwarf, Eagle Kit, leaped through the shadows with the agility of a panther and caught her helpless form in his arms and broke the fall that otherwise might have been fatal.

The riderless horses whirled and dashed away in terror through the pass.

A great bird—a monstrous eagle—perched itself upon a projecting cliff and craning its neck, peered down upon the boy and inanimate girl.

Night fell black, moonless, starless, for the sky was overcast with gray, fleecy clouds.

When Mabel Vane recovered from her unconsciousness the dull glow of a light was the first thing that met her gaze. Her mind, however, was still in a confused and bewildered state. Her head was throbbing with pain. She soon realized she was in a strange place

A great, black rock hung over her. She tried to collect her thoughts and recall the past.

Suddenly a voice fell upon her ears. It broke the spell that enchained her mind. She rose to a sitting posture. Before her sat the little form of the human Eagle Kit. She recognized him at a glance.

Involuntarily the girl shrank back with a shudder. She recalled what the outlaw had said of the Boy Demon; and the overhanging rock with its damp mold, its lurking shadows, and the dull glow of the fire seemed confirmatory of what her captor had told her.

"Ho! by the p'izen monkshood!" exclaimed the dwarf, the moment he saw that Mabel had recovered from her swoon, "I'm dyin' glad to see you rekiverin', Miss Maple Vane. I've been awfully skeered."

His looks and voice dispelled all fears from Mabel's breast.

"Where is he?—the outlaw?" she asked, looking around her.

"Dead, gal, deader'n last year's daisies," was the reply; "the lopin' rascal didn't kill me on the prairie to-day as I did him; but, it was a close shave, miss—d'y'e see that welt 'long this cheek? That's where his bullet kissed me; but I war only stunned. You see, there's not much of me and the wind from a sparrow's wing'll kick me over; but then, I'm ole boss when it comes to makin' trouble for road-agents and robbers. I'm little, I know, but them as fools with me 'cause I'm a dwarf finds they're kickin' a torpedo. Besides I have an advantage that no other boy that ever lived had. When they git me mad I take wing and fly."

"What do you mean by that, Kit?" asked Mabel.

The boy turned and uttered a low, quavering whistle, when, at once, the rustle of mighty wings was heard at one side and, from a dark niche in the great rock under which they were sheltered, a monstrous bird descended and settled by the side of the boy and uttered a strange, peculiar cry.

An exclamation burst from Mabel's lips, for in the wavering glow of the fire the bird looked like a winged demon with its great beak, its monstrous talons and fierce gray eyes.

"It won't hurt you," assured the boy; "it's my dear, ole pet eagle, Whirlwind; and I tell you he's a noble ole bird and knows more 'n I do. He came from South America. He was captered when a little codger, and I'll tell how it came. My father lived in South America where he married a nice lady. He was engaged in catchin' wild horses and tamin' them. One day when I was a little two-year-old shaver, and not bigger than a kitten, I toddled out o' the cabin door, when, down swooped a mighty eagle from the Andes, took me in his talons and carried me off to feed her young with; but just as that eagle descended to her nest, a man among the crags hard by shot the old bird and saved me. One of the young eagles he took alive, and that eagle is my Whirlwind. It happened that the hunter that saved me was a red North American Ingins who had gone there with father, and as he saw whose child I was, he took me home; but when he got there he found my mother had died with terror and grief for she never expected to see me alive again. A year after father was killed and then old Macamah, the Indian, was all the friend I had except Whirlwind. Macamah came back to this country and brought me and Whirlwind with him. He came back because he had a lovely daughter here that he worshiped, but he found when he got here that his daughter had been deceived, betrayed and murdered by a bad white man, who claimed to be a hunter and scout. This broke Macamah's heart, and he sought the solitude of the hills, where us three have lived for several years. Once in awhile Macamah goes to the agency for food and ammunition; but he is alers still and silent and sad—alers on the look-out for the man that killed his child, and if they ever meet one or tother 'll have to dia. But ye see me and Whirlwind's grown up from boyhood together, and sich a bird he is! Why, he brings to the Erie, as we call our cave, rabbits and birds and fawns and young antelopes—oh, lots of things that we use for food. And, sir, one day he came sailin' in with a full grown antelope that beat anything ever heard of."

"The eagle, I have always heard," said Mabel, "is the strongest bird that flies."

"Yes, and a gentleman that I met once told me Whirlwind was the largest bird in the world of the kind. But, one day, after he brought that antelope in, I went to work and rigged a harness atwixt his legs and over his

back and under his wings—see, it's on him now—and takin' hold of it, I made him fly from the ledge, s'posin' he'd jist hop down a little ways, but I'll declare if he didn't sail off with me down the valley and went five miles afore he lit. Oh, but I was skeered! I jist shut my eyes and hung on for dear life. Pizen! how the wind did whistle as we shot through the air. I jist made up my mind I'd not try that ag'in, but then I got over my skeer and one day hitched on ag'in and away we went down the valley a flukin'. I got so at last, I kind o' liked the fun, and Whirlwind seemed to like it, too; and I kept on till I got him so's he'd go jist about as I wanted him to. But he can't carry me very fur, and now when I want to go a long ways, I make him skim along the prairie so's I can touch my toes on the ground and in that way I can outrun a horse. That's jist the way I got in ahead of you and that robber to-night. Whirlwind was circlin' in the air when I met you on the prairie in the fog, and as soon as I recovered from that shot and see'd you're gone, I whistled Whirlwind down, took hold of this rig and if ever you see'd a small boy yanked on tip-toe—half carried and half dragged—across the prairie it was this kitten. You see Whirlwind can't soar up'ards 'ith me, but by startin' from a high point he can give me a long ride before he gits down. See, he's bigger'n, I be, Miss Maple."

The boy stood up by the eagle. The bird was the tallest; the bird was the largest.

"See what a reach his wings has," and he threw aside his arms, which movement was imitated by the bird extending his great wings at full width.

"I know now why you're called the Boy Demon," said Mabel.

Kit burst into a peal of merry laughter.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I've been makin' it lively for the robbers and road-agents lately, and I reckon they call me bad names; but Boy Demon or Boy Angel, I'm the boss outfit to give them trouble. But, Miss Maple, we're not safe here, and if you're willin' to trust me, we'd better be off to the Erie, as I call my home."

"Kit, I trust you with all my heart, and am ready to go with you," replied Mabel adjusting her hat and shawl.

The two at once left their retreat and moved away through the pass. After an hour or two's winding and twisting among the valleys and defiles they began the ascent of a steep mountain. Up and up they climbed, passing through a dark, narrow, dripping tunnel—a strange freak of nature—on up into the very clouds of heaven. At length they reached the Erie, a dry cave in the mountain side, where they were kindly received by the old Indian Macomah, who prepared them a supper of dried venison and broiled pigeon.

Mabel passed the night comfortably as could be expected, and early the next morning when the sun burst through the mist she beheld, from the ledge in front of the Erie, the gold-lined clouds rolling and tumbling beneath and around her, impressing her mind with the delusion of being aloft on the ethereal billows.

The plain was shut off from view, but as the day advanced the clouds lifted and revealed the low-lying foot-hills, the distant prairies and their wood-lined rivers stretching away into the radiant east.

Advancing to Mabel's side, the little dwarf pointed out his eagle that was poised aloft on airy wing, a tiny speck in the sky.

"You see Whirlwind's takin' his mornin' ramble, and after while he'll come home with the dew of heaven on his wings, and ten to one with a bird or animal for his breakfast. He's a voracious critter, Maple, and it'd make ye scream to see him drop through the air on some critter. T'other day he come whistlin' in with a real white pigeon in his talons. It was a beautiful bird, but Whirlwind'd squeezed the life out of it, poor thing; but I took it from him and what do ye think I found 'round its neck?"

"A ribbon, I presume," answered Mabel.

"No, a thread with a paper 'tached to it, and there were writin' on the paper, but as neither I nor Macomah could read I throwed 't away."

"Then it were a carrier pigeon Kit," said Mabel.

"A which?"

"A carrier-pigeon—a pigeon that carries messages from one place to another; perhaps they are used by the government officers in carrying dispatches from one fort to another."

"Gosh! I never thought of that before—oh, look! look at old Whirlwind!—down he goes—jee-whiz! ain't that boss?"

Mabel's eyes were on the eagle when Kit first spoke. She saw the bird close his wings and

dart straight downward through the air with the swiftness of a falling meteor—down, so swift that the eye could scarcely follow him, he went half the distance to the earth, then he threw out his wings, wheeled in the air and then shot upward again and upon swift wing made his way toward the Erie.

"He's got somethin'—that's the way he does it," said Kit; "he's comin' in and we'll soon see what it is."

Closer and closer came the eagle upon whistling wings. In silence the girl and boy waited his return.

In a few moments he hovered above them, then slowly began to settle down until he reached the rock at their feet.

A cry burst from Mabel's lips.

"Oh! ho! yi!" yelled Kit, dancing with glee, "he's got another of them white pigeons we war talkin' 'bout! Give it to me, Whirlwind, and let's see if it's got a paper—yes, sir, it has, by hokey! here's a paper! here's a paper got writin' onto it! It's a messenger-bird—yocp, hi! read it, Maple, and let's see what it says."

He took the paper—a tiny bit neatly folded—from the neck of the dead bird, for the eagle had killed it, and unfolding it handed it to Mabel. There was writing upon it, but in such a fine hand that it was with difficulty she made out the following:

"Send more men—we attacked Baron's train at mouth of Honey Creek and got licked. Come to-day so we can try them to-night, for win we will. Our old leader, Captain Handsome, is with the train. Lost four men killed—several wounded."

"MIDDLETON."

"By snakes!" exclaimed Kit, "that from that pizen old outlaw, Doc. Middleton!"

"And the train to be captured is that of my friends!" said Mabel.

"Yes, but they've got one lickin' and may git another. Maple, I war on my way to put your folks on their guard when I fust met you. I had learned that much by playin' spy on Old Doc at the Dead Pine meetin'."

"There must be one mistake in this message," said Mabel, reading it over; "it says, 'our old leader, Captain Handsome, is with the train.' I do not understand it; it must be a secret cipher."

"It may be, Maple, I can't say; and it may mean what it says."

"To-night, they propose to attack the train again. Oh, Kit! I must go at once and put them on their guard!"

Kit burst into a peal of laughter.

"Why, gal, you see we've got the message, so the robbers 'll be ignorant of Middleton's wants; besides, it's twenty miles to Honey Creek. Just you rest easy and I'll see that your father gits this message afore the sun sets. P'raps he can tell what that 'Captain Handsome' means."

CHAPTER VI.

WILD CASSANDRA.

WHEN Nebraska Ned and Dick Rodman dashed from their covert to the assistance of Judge Zelotes Prosper, their shout brought the four advancing outlaws to a halt. At the same moment a derringer in the hand of the judge flashed in the face of the robber, who, emboldened by the presence of his four friends, had attempted to leap forward and disarm the old man; but the latter was not to be caught in this manner, and the robber paid for his rashness with his life.

As soon as the judge had disposed of the foe in front of him, he turned and leveled his revolvers on the four advancing from the east.

"Bang! bang!" went his unerring little weapons, and two of the four went down, and seeing the odds were now against them the other two freebooters took to their heels.

Old Prosper uttered a yell of triumph and sent a few random shots after the fleeing villains.

"Bravo! hurrah for you, judge!" shouted Nebraska Ned, as he advanced to the old man's side.

"Ho! ha! ha! Neddy, didn't I put an injunction on their deviltry tho', quicker nor a hound pup can lick a skillet? They can't come contempt on this 'ere court, not a bit of it. I didn't come up here to hurt anybody, but I will if they don't show proper respect for the court. If they don't like my decisions they've the right of appeal to the supreme judge. The oleanders and oranges bloom—"

"I say, judge," interrupted Ned, "come, let us go into camp; I know you must be tired and hungry after your night of wild adventures in these woods."

"Wal, I reckon the court will adjourn for re-

freshments, and after while I'll come out and plant them critters under the oleanders and oranges."

Together the three returned to camp. As they entered the swale Mr. Vane was the first one they met. Ned introduced him and Prosper. Others came up and were introduced to the odd-looking old man. But there was one of all the party that Ned was exceedingly anxious to introduce to Prosper, and that was Major Daniel Baron. But he was not in sight. Ned inquired for him.

"He's gone—left soon after you did this mornin'," said one of the party; "he declared he was goin' in search of Mabel, and mountin' his boss rode away like the furies were after him."

A look of disappointment overspread the face of Nebraska Ned. For a moment he stood looking away over the plain as if in deep thought. Then as he caught sight of a tiny speck moving along the western horizon, he turned to his friends and said:

"Men, I am going to follow Major Baron."

His friends were startled by the manner in which he spoke, but before any one could reply he was gone.

Ten minutes later the gallant young ranger was mounted upon his spirited mustang with his rifle slung at his back, and his revolvers with every chamber loaded, in his belt. Riding up to where Dick Rodman stood, he said:

"Dick, I leave this train in your care. Guard it carefully."

Then he turned, leaped his mustang up the embankment and galloped sharply away over the prairie toward the hills, directly upon the trail of Major Baron.

Not once did the brave, determined boy turn his eyes from his course before him; but with brows contracted and lips compressed, he urged his animal forward with eager impatience. He watched the foothills as they drew nearer and nearer. He counted the moments as they passed.

The sun stood upon the meridian when he came to a little purling stream that had its source in the mountains. He stopped to let his horse drink. He was whistling thoughtfully to himself when suddenly a clear, ringing, girlish voice called out to him:

"How d'ye do, Nebraska Ned?"

With a start he raised his eyes. On the summit of a little knoll he beheld that which filled him with surprise and brought a smile to his lips and the color to his cheeks. Upon a sorry-looking old horse, whose four feet were bunched together on the hillock, sat the figure of a young girl with a wild, wonderful face of remarkable beauty. She could not have been over sixteen years of age. Her dark eyes were large, lustrous and sparkling. Her hair hung in long disordered masses down her back. Her complexion, once fair, was bronzed to the hue of an Indian's almost, by exposure to the sun and wind. Her garments were plain yet neat. Her head was bare, as were her little feet and shapely ankles also.

"Why, Cassandra!" exclaimed Ned, "you little witch, is it you?"

"Yes," she replied, her eyes sparkling with a roguish light, "it is me; hav'n't I a right to be here?"

"Yes, but you are surely not aware of the surrounding dangers."

"I don't care for the dangers," she said a little petulantly; "I'll give you to understand, Mr. Ned, that I'm none of your delicate hot-house plants. I'm not afraid to ramble these hills over or use a pistol if I have to. I reckon you think like the folks at the Agency that I'm a rompin' tom-boy, but I'm going to romp if everybody hates—"

"Cassandra," interrupted Ned, "you misunderstand me."

"Oh, I do!" she exclaimed, and her whole countenance seemed to burst into a flood of joy and sunshine; "well, let it all pass, Ned—but say, where are goin' over to the Reservation?"

"No, but I wish I were, and then I'd get to go home with you."

"We'd have a horse-race if you did, wouldn't we?" the rude but honest-hearted little spirit said; "and oh! wouldn't it be jolly for me to beat you?"

Nebraska Ned loved this wild, beautiful and unsophisticated girl, and it was evident to all that knew them that his love was fully reciprocated. She was the daughter of an Indian trader, Andre Markelle, who resided at the Agency some ten miles south of where the young people met. Cassandra, or Wild Cassa, as she was better known, was a wild, wayward girl, fearless and daring as any youth on the

prairie, yet withal possessed of a woman's heart—a pure, kind and loving heart.

Ned lingered at the side of the maiden apparently forgetful of his mission; but at length he started from his blissful dream, bid her good-by and galloped on.

Cassandra watched him out of sight, then she turned her horse's head, plunged down the little hill, crossed the creek and started homeward.

She had gone but a short distance when she discovered a man on foot hurrying down from the west as if to head her off. Drawing rein in a clump of bushes she watched the man. As he approached a mischievous smile played about her lips, and placing her hand in her pocket she drew forth a handsome little silver-mounted revolver and pointing it at the man's head, cried out:

"Halt! throw up your hands or die!"

The man stopped short and looked at her in amazement.

The man was none other than the redoubtable Professor Jimrack.

"Horned catapillars of Joppa!" burst from the astounded man's lips, "what in the nation are you? gal or boy? imp or imps?"

"I'm a road-agent," was the cool and desperate reply, given in a tone of convincing firmness.

"Road nothin'; you're jokin' now, gal, I know; I am the noted Professor Jimrack here on a scientific expedition, and mustn't be trifled with. Put up that pop-gun and tell me whose gal you be."

"Professor Jimrack, I am your gal, if you don't hold up your hands; you're the man I've been watchin' for. I mean what I say, sir; I'll shoot."

"Pshaw! I never see'd a woman in my life that could shoot."

"You didn't? well, do you see that bird yonder?"

"Yes," he replied, "a blind man could see it."

"Well," said the girl raising her revolver and killing the bird, "now do you see it?"

Jimrack shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Holy stars! you're a young wild-catess—a catamountess—a witch, bein't you?"

"Hold-up—your—hands!" came the measured reply from the girl's lips, again bringing her pistol to bear on the old man.

"All right, up they go," he exclaimed, resignedly; "I'd as lief be your prisoner as anybody's. Every man, woman and child I've met yit in these diggins has taken me captive; but it's all right, it's all right. I'm yours to command, love and obey, gal. I'm a willin' captive—they eyes of yours have done the work for me."

"Then turn and move along that road before me," she said, "and if you try to get away I'll pop you over."

"Come on, sweet captor," the professor replied, "come along, my Josey," and he turned and started off down the valley. Cassandra rode along behind him, her eyes glowing and her lips compressed; but she could not restrain her emotions long, and she finally burst into a peal of bewitching laughter that rung in merry echoes through the valleys.

Jimrack stopped and looking up at her in surprise asked:

"Are ye mad? stark, maniac mad?"

"No, I'm jist jokin'—I'm not a road-agent, old softy. I—I was jist foolin' you," and again her voice rang through the hills around in peals of happy laughter.

"It's too late now, gal, I'm your captive; you must take care of me. I'm willin' to be taken—jist trot me right along."

"Good-day, sir softy Jimrack," she exclaimed, and with a wave of her hand, she dashed away, leaving the professor alone in the valley, the worst dumbfounded and outwitted man in the west.

"He-avens!" he snarled, "that beats the speckled Jews all to thunder and Mars. I'd like to know what kind of a rip-roarin', hyena-laughin', sure shootin', little black-eyed animal she is, anyhow! Somethin' nateral history don't mention. She ought to be in a cage, and—a thousand dollars by snakes! I've struck the right trail. Yum, yum, now, if that slum-ickin' old Jack Drew war only here, we could lay for our game. Oh, never mind, my young wild witch," and he shook his fist in the direction Wild Cassandra had gone; "never mind; you've had your day and I'll have mine!"

And the professor turned and trudged off down the valley whistling to himself.

CHAPTER VII.

A VILLAIN FOILED.

Major Daniel Baron was a man of some thirty-five years of age. He was possessed of fine personal appearance, a fair education and quite a

knowledge of the world; yet fortune seemed to be against him for he was comperatively a poor man. However, the new gold fields of the Black Hills were inviting him to its hidden wealth, and thither was he bound with the friends he had induced to accompany him. But the worst of all the major was in love—in love with Mabel Vane, and it was this regard for the fair girl that impelled him forward to her rescue. But what reason had he to think she was in the mountains whither he rode so straight and fast? And why had Nebraska Ned followed him? It could not have been the spirit of rivalry, for Nebraska Ned loved Wild Cassandra. It could not have been for envy for Ned had none of that element in his composition.

Major Baron rode straight for the hills and was lost in their shadows more than two hours before Nebraska Ned. As he entered the pass he glanced round like one looking for familiar objects. He reined his horse into a walk and whistled softly while his thoughts were busy.

Finally the major turned to the left and entered a narrow defile which soon debouched into a little grassy valley or opening. Here he dismounted, turned his horse loose to graze and then laid himself down to rest under an overhanging rock on the edge of the valley. Here he lay in deep meditation. The sun crossed the meridian; the hours went by. But at length he was started from his repose by the sound of voices. He started up. He saw two persons coming down the valley—a girl and boy. An exclamation of joy burst from his lips when he recognized the girl as Mabel Vane.

The boy with her was Eagle Kit.

Baron advanced to meet them. Kit drew his pistol for the man was a stranger to him.

"No, no, Kit!" cried Mabel, "'tis Major Baron—a friend! Oh, Mr. Baron! I am so glad to meet you; is father well? is the train safe?"

She ran forward and in her joy and excitement extended both hands to the major.

"Yes, my little woman," he replied, clasping her hands in his, and gazing down into her sparkling eyes, "all are safe, but we have been distracted by your absence."

"Oh, dear! I knew you all would be; but thanks to Eagle Kit, I was rescued from the outlaws. Oh, such a dreadful, dreadful time as I have had!"

"Come, sit down and tell me about it," said Baron.

"No, indeed, major," replied the girl, impatiently, "we are anxious to reach camp before night. The train is threatened, and it is a long way to Honey Creek."

Then she told him, in a hurried manner, of the intercepted message taken from the neck of the carrier-pigeon.

The major betrayed no little surprise and uneasiness when he had read the paper; but then, as a smile played round his mouth, he said:

"Well, you need have no fears, Mabel; we have their message, so those at head-quarters will never know of Middleton's wants."

"I don't know 'bout that argymnt," said Eagle Kit; "they might have sent two messages; it's best for us to be sure."

"Then take my horse yonder and go, Eagle Kit, and put the train on its guard," commanded Baron, putting the message in his pocket; "I will follow on with Mabel."

"Well, it's jist as Maple says," replied Kit.

"It will be satisfactory to me, Kit," said Mabel, feeling the utmost confidence in Major Baron; "do go at once, and tell father I am well."

Thus it was settled. Kit was soon mounted upon the Baron's horse, flying eastward through the hills and over the prairie.

Major Baron watched the little mite of humanity out of sight; then, as a smile of inward joy overspread his face, he turned to Mabel and said:

"Now let us move on, Mabel; we have a tiresome journey before us."

She took his arm and they moved slowly away, but no sooner had their journey together begun than she felt a strange uneasiness stealing over her. She knew not why it was—she had confidence in Baron.

Mabel took no notice of the course they were pursuing. They conversed about the outlaws, the dangers of the plains, the hills, and in fact every thing their surroundings suggested.

Finally Baron turned the conversation upon a subject that Mabel had hoped might be evaded. It was love—a subject he never failed to bring up when alone with her.

"Mabel," he said, "we will soon be at our journey's end, and then all will settle down to the busy life of miners. If I only had the assurance of that for which I have sued so often—

your love—I could go on with a light, cheerful heart, and—"

"Mr. Baron," replied the little girl, seriously, "I wish for your sake it were possible for you and I to be more than the best of friends to each other; but this cannot be, and I will tell you why, knowing you will accept my reasons as good ones: I love another."

"Another?" he cried, as if her words cut to his very heart, while a look of pain settled upon his face that caused Mabel to regret what she had said.

Fortunately, for her relief, she caught sight of a horse browsing among some bushes to their right, and changed the subject by calling attention to the animal, which was bridled and saddled. She recognized the horse at a glance by the red blanket rolled up and strapped on the saddle behind as the one ridden by her captor on the previous day.

"I shall endeavor to catch the animal for you to ride, Mabel," said Baron in his usual pleasant tone.

Having seen her pleasantly seated under a tree, the major started off after the horse. The animal, whose feet were tangled in the reins hobbled off as he approached. He followed it up and was soon lost to the maiden's view, behind a turn in the valley.

Mabel was sorely troubled. She knew she had wounded the major's heart, and a knowledge of the fact pained her. However, she tried to dismiss the matter from her mind by diverting her thoughts to her father, Eagle Kit, and he who was ever present in her mind and heart—Dick Rodman, the handsome young ranger.

Thus engaged she leaned her tired body and throbbing head back against the tree-trunk and closed her eyes. She sunk into a doze from which she was started by the sound of footsteps. Opening her eyes she saw a tall man with a mask, made of a handkerchief, over his face, standing over her. In his hands he held a red blanket outspread, and before she could utter a single note of alarm, he threw it over her head and shoulders, and then seizing her around the waist held the blanket firm against her efforts to remove it. Her cries to Major Baron died within the thick folds of the blanket—her struggles were futile against the strength of the man, who, lifting her in his arms, started away with her. After carrying her some time he came to where a horse was in waiting, and mounting the animal with the maiden in his arms, he rode away.

The poor girl made repeated efforts for liberty, and called for Major Baron's help, but all was in vain. Only the hoof-strokes of the horse answered her. Her captor was silent and dumb.

And thus they rode on for miles. To Mabel it seemed an age since she had been shut up in the folds of that blanket. She was numb in limbs and body from her cramped position lying across the animal's withers in the arms of her captor. But finally the man removed the blanket from her head. She felt the cold air upon her cheeks, but she could not see. It was night; darkness enveloped them although the moon and the stars were in the sky.

A chilly air pervaded the pass through which they were moving.

Feigning unconsciousness Mabel endeavored to get a glimpse at her captor's face, but failed; it was still masked.

Suddenly the man started with a quick, nervous movement and glanced back over his shoulder. Then he drew rein. The far-off ring of hoof-strokes came to the ears of both captive and captor.

The latter settled himself into his saddle, gathered the reins in his disengaged hand then spoke in a quick, sharp tone to his horse.

The sound of his voice almost forced a cry from Mabel's lips.

"Halt! surrender or die!"

The voice that made this demand was undoubtedly that of a female, who, enveloped in a cloak, with a pistol that glinted and glimmered in the moonlight in hand, rode from the shadows of a clump of bushes and leveled the weapon upon the breast of Mabel's captor.

Involuntarily, so it seemed, the man raised the form of his captive before him as if to ward off the bullet of the unknown from his own body. His right arm being engaged in supporting Mabel prevented him from drawing his revolver.

"I've got you, girl-thief," exclaimed that girlish voice, "you can't conceal your big, sinful body behind that helpless girl, and so don't you budge a hand or foot or I'll pop you square between the eyes. Drop that girl and throw up your hands!"

No sooner was this demand made than Mabel slipped from the villain's arms to the ground. At the same instant the man attempted to draw his revolver, but the eye of the little cloaked figure was upon him and as he raised his revolver there was a flash, a report and a cry from the villain's lips, and he dropped his weapon from a shattered hand. Then, as he attempted to slip from his saddle so as to cover his body behind his horse, that unknown's revolver rung out again with a clear "ping," and the villain's horse plunged forward with a snort and almost human cry and fell dead—shot through the brain.

As the animal sprung away from its master the man's hat was knocked from his head, his mask fell from his face, and in the mellow moonlight the startled Mabel Vane saw that her abductor was—Major Dan Baron!

CHAPTER VIII.

TROUBLE IN THE PASS.

MABEL VANE was astounded by the discovery that her abductor was Major Baron; but in a moment all was clear to her. Her rejection of his love was doubtless the cause that had turned the gentleman and lover into a villain and captor that he might possess her even against her will.

As the man's wounded horse sprung away from him and left him standing uncovered in the moonlight, he shot a quick fierce look at Mabel, and then at the cloaked figure on the horse he hurled a fearful malediction. Like a drunken man, his bleeding, torn hand hanging at his side, he then reeled back into the shadows of the bluff and disappeared.

A clear, ringing laugh burst from the lips of the little cloaked figure on the horse before Mabel, that rung in startling echoes through the hills around.

Mabel turned to her strange rescuer from whose head and shoulders fell the mantle that enveloped face and form, revealing the face of a young girl—a wild, elfish-looking little creature.

"Oh, mercy!" burst from the strange girl's lips, and she brought a little fist down into her palm with such force that it fairly cracked. "I am so sorry I didn't kill that feller outright, for tryin' to steal sich a pretty little lady as you are."

At this juncture a horseman flying down the pass drew rein before the maidens—glanced at the dead horse, at Mabel Vane and then at the girl upon the horse.

"Nebraska Ned!" burst simultaneously from the two girls' lips.

"My goodness! what does this all mean?" the astonished Boy Ranger cried.

"It means that I have rescued that young lady from the scamp that you've been 'bout breakin' your neck to overtake," was the reply of the girl on the horse.

"Why, it is Wild Cassandra! girl, are you mad?" the boy exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, I'm mad as a hornet," was the response, "and have been mad all day."

"Oh, Ned! she is a brave girl—she rescued me from one whom we have always considered a true gentleman," said Mabel.

"I know to whom you refer, Major Dan Baron."

"Isn't it dreadful, Ned, that he should be such a man?"

"Yes, indeed; but where is he now?"

"He skipped out after I shot his horse and rapped him over the knuckles with a bullet," said Wild Cassandra, "and I'm mad now as a hornet to think I didn't plug him right through his wicked heart."

"He deserves it, Cassa," replied Ned; "he is a bad man, although I never dreamed of the fact until I detected him tryin' to assassinate Judge Zelotes Prosper a few evenings ago on Beaver Creek. When I found he'd gone in search of Miss Vane I resolved to follow him. I could trust him no longer. On my way here I met Eagle Kit who told me where you were, Mabel, and also of the message taken from the dead pigeon. That Captain Handsome, it struck me at once, was Dan Baron; and if so, then Dan Baron is the once notorious robber-chief who infested the hills and prairies south of here a few years ago. But I cannot imagine why he should want to murder Judge Prosper unless he is afraid the judge will place his villainous neck in the halter where it belongs. By Eagle Kit's directions I was enabled to strike his trail and follow him up; but I am surprised to see you here, Cassandra."

"Oh, yes, you're always surprised," she said, a little petulantly, "ain't you disappointed this time?"

"No, indeed, my brave, fearless little girl," replied the boy.

"Well, I was havin' a little ride when I discovered that old scamp gallopin' off with that lady, and so I made up my mind he'd got to disgorge, as they say at the Agency, and so I jist put old Lilac under whip and cutting across got in ahead of the fellow and ambushed him. Oh, mercy! but old Lilac made the gravel fly and the pass ring! I never rode so fast in my life—we jist 'sizzed.'"

"Well, as you are a long ways from home, Cassa, and as there is danger of that gallant major finding his old companions in sin and giving us trouble, we had better be getting back out of this defile."

"All right, Ned," replied the wild girl of the hills, "just boost that young girl up here behind me on Lilac and we will go it a-kiting—make the old pass smoke."

Mabel was assisted to a seat behind the little heroine and facing southward the three began retracing their steps through the defile.

The moon now in the zenith shed a soft, dreamy light over hill and valley.

The night winds stirred the pines on the rugged range into a gentle murmur.

Night-birds whirled in and out of the shadows—over the heads of the three young people—upon whistling wings.

Wild Cassandra's voice ran incessantly. Hers was a wild, free spirit. She knew no fear. Now and then her girlish vivacity would burst forth in peals of rippling laughter that would start a hundred elfin voices ringing in wildest glee among the rocks.

They rode along in a walk. The eyes and ears of Nebraska Ned were constantly on the alert. He felt that he had now a double care upon his hands.

Finally they rode from the defile into a wide and sparsely wooded pass running at right angles with the defile. As they did so, half a dozen horsemen rode from the black mouth of a defile on the opposite side of the pass and fell in alongside of them.

Neither party was aware of the presence of the other until they were together; and at a glance Nebraska Ned saw that the strangers were a party of robbers or outlaws.

The pass being devoid of timber where they had met, the moon shone full upon them.

"By the stars above us!" cried an outlaw in astonishment, "what outfit is this! what have we here?"

"Nebraska Ned and a pair of little butterflies!" answered another who had recognized Ned.

The Boy Ranger had never been so completely taken by surprise before. He saw that they had, despite his precaution, ridden into a trap, from whence there appeared but little hope of escape.

An outlaw rode up alongside the girls, who were a little in the rear of Nebraska Ned, threw up the wide brim of his hat in front, and glared into their faces with a leering smile.

"Sir, do not insult those girls!" cried Nebraska Ned, laying his hand upon his revolver.

"Peace, youngster," said an outlaw, "or you'll never go gallavantin' through these hills with sich pretty gals again; I only want to relieve you of your double burden—"

"Touch one of us, you darned ole robber!" burst from the lips of the brave but irreverent Cassandra, "and I'll knock your head off—jist you dare to!"

"Why, you little spitfire, you—"

The villain's words were here cut short. A pistol in the hands of Wild Cassandra flashed in his face, and with a horrible gurgling cry, he started back, clutched at his horse's mane, reeled in his saddle, and as his horse dashed away in affright, hurled him violently to the earth.

With an oath a comrade of the dead man spurred alongside Cassandra's horse, seized it by the bits and jerked it back almost upon its haunches.

"Jump, Mabel, jump!" cried Cassandra, and together the two girls leaped to the ground, and like frightened fawns darted across the narrow, moonlit valley, and disappeared among the shadows of the rocky bluffs.

Nebraska Ned turned and endeavored to protect the girls, but the odds were against him. An outlaw rode up behind him and dealt him a blow that knocked him out of his saddle and stunned him so that he was made prisoner without further resistance.

Two outlaws leaped from their horses and ran in pursuit of the maidens.

Along the base of the high, perpendicular bluffs grew patches of brushwood into which Cassandra and Mabel had fled. Cassandra led

the way as if accustomed to such adventure. In her right hand she clutched her unerring little derringer while with her left she parted the bushes before her. In this manner they dodged along through the undergrowth and shadows for some distance when they finally came to an overhanging ledge where the darkness was intense. Here they stopped and listened. Mabel was shivering with fear; Wild Cassandra was calm and cool.

The voices of the outlaws could be heard calling to each other out of the darkness.

"They'd better not fool around us," whispered Cassandra; "I've three more loads in my revolver and I'll make every one count. I'm mad now, Mabel, and I'm not afraid of anybody, if he's big as this mountain."

"Oh, Cassandra! they're coming this way in search of us! they're near us now," exclaimed Mabel.

"Let 'em come, gals," said a strange yet assuring voice from out the shadows near them; "and they'll be the wust surprised critters that's lived since Noah's ark sailed over the mountains of Asia. I are Judge Zelotes Prosper, o' Carlina, gals, and I are a hull school o' speckled alligators in a fight. Jist docket yer case afore this court and I'll see that you git a judgment—"

Here the flash of a pistol in the hands of the speaker, mysterious Judge Prosper, was followed by a groan of agony and the fall of a body. One of the advancing outlaws had paid the penalty of his villainy with his life; but the other one believing that Cassandra had fired the shot, leaped forward into the darkness where he had seen the flash, but instead of seizing a maiden he found himself seized by the rude hands of a man.

The two foes grappled and the next moment were whirling and crashing through the undergrowth in a fearful death-struggle.

CHAPTER IX.

EAGLE KIT'S VISIT TO CAMP.

THE situation in camp at the mouth of Honey Creek had not materially changed after Nebraska Ned's departure from what it had been before. It is true, the place still remained in a state of siege. An outlaw or Indian could be seen here or there on the plain or in the woods, evidently watching movements at camp.

Judge Zelotes Prosper ate a hearty breakfast with the emigrants, after which he had the party's physician dress and patch up his bruised and battered face. But no sooner was this done than the odd old stranger announced his intention of departing for the hills; and that too upon foot in the very face of surrounding dangers. Dick Rodman tried to prevail on him to stay, but he would listen to nothing, and finally took his departure.

Dick Rodman had fully realized the responsibility resting upon him since Ned had left. He was fully satisfied that the outlaws had not relinquished their determination to capture the train, nor would not until every effort had been exhausted.

There were two women in the party besides Mabel Vane, and for these a place of safety had been prepared in case of an attack.

All the party could do was wait and watch until those who had gone in search of Mabel Vane returned.

Mr. Vane was almost prostrated over the absence of his child. He knew not certain what had been her fate, and the strange conduct of Major Dan Baron and of Nebraska Ned had a tendency to still add to his doubts and fears.

Dick Rodman seemed to share Mr. Vane's trouble with him. The boy's eyes were ever fixed with an eager, impatient look toward the west. A dozen times he expressed the wish that he had gone in Ned's place. It told its story—Dick loved the missing girl.

The day wore slowly away. The sun crossed the meridian and shone hot and sultry on the besieged. Nature seemed hushed in a painful silence. Not a sign of life had been visible for hours outside of the "wallow," but all at once a large bird was seen sailing down from the direction of the mountains—now and then circling around and around and then darting forward upon a swift wing.

Soon the great bird was directly over camp, where it seemed to stop and stand motionless upon airy wings as if to search the interior of the camp, then it glided forward and began circling downward until it seemed it was going to light, when, with a frightened scream, it shot suddenly away and finally settled in a tree-top half a mile south of camp.

To the plainsmen there is always a significance in the movement of birds; but in all his

years of experience Dick Rodman had never seen such movements in a creature of the "upper deep" as those just witnessed. At first he took the bird for a vulture—one of those monster scavengers of the plain—but as it drew nearer he found he was mistaken. It was an eagle, and a larger bird he had never seen. He had shot many eagles, but they were mere sparrows compared with the one he had just seen.

"I'd give anything for a shot at that monster," the boy said, as he watched it settle in the tree-top.

At this juncture attention was called to a horseman that rose suddenly on a swell in the prairie. He was riding at a high rate of speed, and coming directly toward camp.

Every eye was turned with eager expectation toward the horseman. "Was it Baron? Was it Ned?" were the questions that passed from lip to lip.

Suddenly, as if conjured up from the earth, six more horsemen rose into view on the prairie between the first rider and camp.

At sight of them the lone horseman swung to the left and continued his wild ride.

The six horsemen started in swift pursuit of him.

"By gracious! d'y'e see that?" exclaimed Dick Rodman; "that lone horseman is doubtless a friend who's been comin' to camp, and them six horsemen are outlaws. I see now why Baron and Ned and old Prosper were permitted to go away unmolested: every man leavin' weakened us that much, but now that some one wants to join us they're up and smorin'. But they're not gainin' much on the lone feller—on tryin' to keep between him and camp."

The pursued headed toward the timber while the pursuers, strung out like Indians behind, endeavored to head him off. Presently three or four more horsemen appeared on the plain and joined in the chase.

Mr. Vane procured his field-glass and brought it to bear upon the exciting racers. A cry escaped his lips.

"The pursued," he said, "is a boy—a mere child, and the horse he rides is that of Major Baron!"

He passed the glass to a friend. The horse was easily recognized as that ridden away by the major.

"He's dispatched a messenger to us," said Vane, "oh may Heaven help the lad! Perhaps he's tidings of my child."

Rapidly the little fugitive gained upon his yelling pursuers; he was in a fair way of out-riding them, and almost to the timber, when his horse stumbled and fell—shooting the little rider forward to the earth. But in an instant the lad was upon his feet ready to remount, but the horse did not rise.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Rodman, "the boy's horse is down and the little lad is at them demons' mercy! Men, we must now act—go to the youth's assistance for he doubtless comes with a message. Ah! see, he runs afoot toward the timber! he is a brave lad."

True enough the little figure turned and ran toward the woods.

The great eagle that had settled in the tree-top a few minutes before spread its mighty wings and soared upward—circled and whirled in the air like a bird when wounded yet striving to keep a wing, and finally settled upon another tree-top.

The boy disappeared in the woods.

The outlaws swept on—passed the wounded horse and glided into the timber.

Then again that winged monarch of the air swept into view over the tree-tops and over the very heads of the outlaws bearing in its talons a great burden—a human burden!

Toward the camp the great bird came on laboring wing.

Out of the woods burst the outlaw horsemen firing into the air at the great eagle.

"Great heavens!" cried Mr. Vane, "that horrible vulture has seized that child-fugitive and is carrying it away to a fearful death!"

Dick Rodman stood motionless and speechless, his eyes fixed upon the bird with an expression of horror therein.

The great bird left the outlaws far behind, but it was gradually coming nearer the earth as if borne down by its living burden.

Within a hundred paces of the camp it touched the earth, released its prey and then with a frightened scream rose into the air in spiral circles till lost almost in the clouds of heaven.

The outlaws in apparent astonishment drew rein and watched the bird rising heavenward. They seemed afraid to approach nearer the

camp for half a dozen rifles were ready to receive them when they came within range.

"Great mysteries! what does it all mean?" asked Mr. Vane, a puzzled expression settling upon his face.

"Ay!" cried Dick Rodman: "I have it! I have it! It is the Boy Demon, Eagle Kit! Ah, there he comes!"

A diminutive figure came gliding through the prairie grass and bounded like a rubber ball over the bank into the wallow. Then as it straightened up and glanced around the place and at the astonished crowd before it, it appeared like a veritable little imp from the fabled land of Lilliput.

For a moment not a soul stirred. The little dwarf seemed to have filled all with speechless wonder. The boy was the first to break the silence.

"Hurrah!" he shouted in a tone of joy, "I beat them ole pirates after all. Folks, I am Eagle Kit, fresh from the mountains with news for you all, thanks to boof and wing!"

This broke the spell and the next moment the human midget was surrounded by the besieged, eager with curiosity and wonderment.

"What news have you, Kit?" asked Dick Rodman.

"News? why Miss—Miss Vane is well and alive—I rescued her from an old outlaw that's hussellin' her away into—"

"You rescued her?" exclaimed Mr. Vane, grasping the boy's hand in his, and looking down into his big, black eyes.

"Yes, sir, I jist sent the old robber galleywest, and saved Miss Maple and took her to the Erie and kept her over night. I know I'm a little wart of a lookin' thing, folks, but I'm wusser'n a small torpedo when I go off. Did you see my race with them jacksnipes awhile ago? and my fly-over with Old Hurricane, my eagle? Gosh, but he's the bossiest bird that ever flapped a wing over Dakota."

"And so Mabel, my child, is safe?" repeated Mr. Vane, beside himself with joy.

"She war when I left her. Ye see me and her was on our way over here when we met a chap called Baron—Gheral Baron or sunthin'—"

"Ah, it was Major Baron," said Vane.

"Well, I guess 'twas 'major.' He war out on the hunt for Maple, and when we showed him a message we'd taken from the neck of a carrier-pigeon that the boss of the clouds, Old Hurricane, brought in this morning, he war wonderfully worked up. So he jist puts the message down in his pocket and told me to mount his hoss and light out for this place and tell you that old Doc Middleton has sent for reinforcements to capture your train. As he war the biggest, and Maple didn't care, why I come."

"What was in the message? Why did Baron not send it?" asked Dick Rodman.

"Well, let's see," said Kit scratching his curly head thoughtfully, and then he went on and repeated the message word for word as Mabel had read it to him.

The party was startled by the contents of the paper, as given them from the boy's memory. That part relating to Captain Handsome was the most startling. Instantly each man searched the face of his companions for evidence of guilt.

Finally Mr. Vane exclaimed, unable to restrain his emotions longer:

"Who of our party is the ex-robber chief, Captain Handsome?"

"I will tell you, Mr. Vane," said Dick Rodman, his white lips betraying his inward emotion: "Captain Handsome is that man, Major Dan Baron!"

CHAPTER X.

A SILENT SLAYER.

DICK RODMAN'S words fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of his friends. Not a man could—not a man dared refute the young ranger's charge against Major Baron, although there were those who felt that it was as preposterous as it was unjust. Mr. Vane, however, felt satisfied of the truthfulness of the charge. He knew that Baron had at one time spent several years in the West, and he knew not but that those years had been spent as a robber-captain.

"My child," he said, again bowed down with grief, "is lost! Better that she were dead than in the power of Dan Baron."

"But, Mr. Vane," said Dick, "he may have been a robber once and yet an honest man now; and—"

"His going away, Dick, was very strange," persisted Vane; "even Nebraska Ned mistrusted

something wrong. No, I tell you that man has tolled us all here to our destruction."

"Oh, p'izen nightshade!" exclaimed Eagle Kit, wringing his hands in sore distress, "if I have killed that poor little girl by givin' her up to that man, I'll jump from a mountain peak and bu'st myself. Oh, dear! I thought I war doin' everything up in such a boss style."

"My dear little fellow," said Vane, sympathetically, "God knows you have done nobly—better than any other human, perhaps, could have done. Don't grieve yourself, my boy. Let us hope for the best. Nebraska Ned is out after Baron and may—"

"Yes, sir!" exclaimed Kit, "I met Ned, and told him where I'd left that major and Miss Maple, and away he went, lickey-tee-scoot."

"Then there is still a hope," said Ishmael Brown.

"Kit, do you think there are many outlaws about?" asked Mr. Vane.

"Not over a dozen, I don't b'lieve. They're waitin' for reinforcements, but if their comin' depends on that message we took in, they'll never git here. Ye see them as are layin' round on the prairie like lousy coyotes 'll let a feller leave camp 'cause it weakens yer force that much, but if a chap wants to get into camp they'll bu'st their giblets to catch him as they tried to me. Fixed as you are here, six men can lick fifty robbers."

"I think myself that it will not require all of us to guard camp," said Mr. Vane, "and as the outlaws molest no one leaving, I have a mind to go in search of my child."

"I will accompany you, Mr. Vane," said Dick Rodman.

"And here, too," chimed in the little dwarf, his bright eyes aglow with boyish eagerness.

A consultation was held when it was decided that six men were sufficient to take care of the camp, and that the others might go and assist Vane in the search for his daughter.

In a very short time the distracted father, accompanied by Eagle Kit, Dick Rodman, John Perrin and Isaac Freeman—all well armed and equipped—were moving westward over the rolling prairie.

Briskly they made their way mountainward, guided by the tallest peak before them.

Not an outlaw showed his head anywhere upon the plain.

Eagle Kit proved himself a wonderful human mite. He was as merry and comical as a little clown. In his odd, humorous way he told many stories of daring adventure in which he and his eagle figured as chief actors. His stories were of such an original character and told in such a happy vein of humor decidedly his own, that they did much to dispel the gloom and fear from the minds of his companions.

It was nearly sunset when they reached the foot-hills, and the shadows of evening were already gathering in the valleys.

An owl flew from his retreat in the rocks and settling upon a tree, ogled and blinked at our friends in a comical way. He was not over twenty paces from them. Eagle Kit stooping and picking up a stone, said:

"I never 'low an owl to stare me in the face that way—I hate owls—they alers make night so shivery with their te-whit-ti-hoo-oo-oo-o!"

The last notes fell from his lips in wonderful imitation of the hooting of an owl; then throwing back his hand the boy hurled the stone at the big-eyed bird, and true to its aim the missile went home, striking the owl in the head and killing it dead.

"A wonderful good shot, Kit," said John Perrin.

"That's nothin'," replied the youth in a spirit of boyish pride; "I'll bet Old Hurricane that I can throw a stone nearer center every pop than any chap in this crowd can shoot a pistol-ball. I'm jist boss on stone-flippin' and never waste powder and lead when I can reach my game with a dornick."

By the time the party reached the headwaters of the Cheyenne river, darkness was upon them. They stopped to rest a few minutes, partake of their meager supply of food and determine upon what course they should pursue during the night.

So well was Eagle Kit acquainted with the surrounding hills that he assured the party that he could lead the way to where he had parted with Mabel and Baron despite the darkness.

They resumed their journey and traveled slowly and cautiously on into the lonely hills. It was past midnight when they suddenly discovered a light across on the opposite side of the river on whose banks they stood. It was a mere flash like that made by a match—it lasted only a moment.

"A fire-fly," said John Perrin.

"I don't know 'bout that," replied young Rodman.

"Wait for me here and I'll know," said Eagle Kit, and before any one could interpose an objection he was gone.

The dwarf crossed the river on some driftwood and with the silence of a shadow made his way in the direction in which he had seen the light.

Coming to a certain point he caught the faint glow and glimmer of a camp-fire in a valley half a mile distant. He at once moved on toward it. As he came near he saw the form of a man moving about in the light.

Within a clump of undergrowth some thirty paces from camp the little scout found three horses saddled and bridled—evidence of the fact that they were to be used again that night. And greatly to his surprise he found one of the animals was that of Nebraska Ned. He knew it despite the darkness.

"That young feller's in trouble," he mused, creeping on toward the camp.

Within a cluster of bushes not over ten paces from the fire the young scout came to a halt and searched the camp.

Two men sat before the fire, and their evil faces, as well as their garbs, were sufficient evidence of their character. They were outlaws well armed and equipped. Near them lay a human form, apparently bound hand and foot. It was Nebraska Ned, a helpless prisoner.

From the general appearance of things Kit concluded that the freebooters had stopped there but for a short time. They acted very much as if they were expecting some one who was to be guided to that point by the glow of their fire, for they could have needed a fire for no other purpose at that time.

The outlaws seemed to have no fears whatever. They laughed and talked in a loud, boisterous spirit—occasionally addressing some jeering remark to the helpless young ranger before them, and who had in the past been such an obstacle to their free operations in plundering travelers and settlers.

Finally Ned rose to a sitting posture and gazed into the fire. His face wore a sad, troubled look.

"I reckon you begin to realize, my young crusader," said one of the robbers, addressing Ned, "that your career is not one of continued pleasure—that you can't play the gallant to all the pretty gals that comes this way, shoot mountaineers with impunity and do as you please generally by moonlight on forbidden grounds. Just as soon as the rest of our boys come up we propose to see how long you can stand on air with a rope around your neck and over the limb of a tree."

"I wonder what's detainin' them?" put in the other outlaw with an oath.

A cry from his comrade was the only answer, as the man clutched at his head, fell backward at full length on the earth while a convulsive shudder ran through his frame.

"Kirk! Kirk!" cried the man's companion, "what ails you, old comrade? Are the snakes attackin' you ag'in?"

But Kirk made no answer. His friend raised his head. His body was limp, motionless and apparently lifeless.

"He's ruptured a blood-vessel," said Ned, who saw the blood running from the man's mouth and left ear.

Suddenly the body of the outlaw began quivering as if with convulsions. His jaws fell apart; he rattled in the throat. Bloody ooze gurgled and sputtered from his lips. His body became rigid, then relaxed and fell in a lifeless heap.

"Whizz!"

Something shot past the ear of the other outlaw and went clipping into the foliage beyond. The robber dropped his dead comrade's head, sprang to his feet, grasped his revolver and glared around like an animal at bay.

A deathly silence reigned for full a minute, then followed a sharp, thud-like sound—the outlaw staggered to one side and fell like an ox in the shambles while a half-muttered imprecation escaped his lips.

Then a little figure came gliding from the darkness, ran to where Nebraska lay and bending over him severed his bonds.

"Up, Ned, and knock a crack in the air," said the voice of Eagle Kit. "I only got in a stunner on that last pirate—stone was too light and I couldn't find a better one—slapped in a reg'lar King David on that t'other Goliath, didn't I? Knocked him gallawestward—but, come, Ned, let's h'ist ourselves out of here."

So quick had all this transpired that Nebraska

Ned's throbbing brain could scarcely keep pace with the occurring events, and ere he had fully realized the situation Eagle Kit and he were under cover of the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PURSUERS GO INTO CAMP.

OUT in the timber beyond the radius of lights Nebraska Ned and his little rescuer stopped.

"My gracious, Kit!" said Ned laying his hand on the dwarf's shoulder, "I am completely astonished—dumbfounded."

"Be you? what about?"

"You, and the way you rescued me."

"Oh, pizen! that war jist as easy as grease, Ned; I jist took in the situation and then I shied dornicks at 'em pi-rates like David, of whom the old missionary used to read to me out of his Bible, did at the giant Goliath; and I raked bowler from taw on the fust one; but didn't git in a boss fling on t'other chap and only muddled his brain a little. But, Ned, where's Miss Maple? d'ye know?"

"I don't, Kit; but she and Cassandra Markelle are either captives or wanderers in these hills. I was with them when set upon by a pack of outlaws. Cassandra shot one of them and then she and Mabel sprung from their horse and ran into the darkness. I was then overpowered, knocked from my horse and made prisoner. Those two robbers brought me here where they were to await the coming of their comrades. So God only knows where the girls are; but what news from camp, Kit?"

In a few words as possible Kit told of his visit to camp, and that four of his friends were waiting for him up the river ways.

The news fired Ned's breast with burning impatience. He was eager to be off to his friends.

By this time the wounded outlaw had so far recovered from his blow as to be able to sit up. Bleeding at nose and mouth, he gazed around him in wild confusion.

"Shall I shoot him, Ned?" asked Kit, drawing his pistol.

"No, no; let the wicked wretch go with his miserable life. They say to turn a singed rat loose it will take its friends and leave the neighborhood; and perhaps if we let that wounded robber go he will warn his friends that there is a little torpedo in these hills likely to explode at any moment, and they will profit by the warning and seek other quarters. Let us be off, Kit."

"But what 'bout the hosses? Hadn't we ought to cabbage 'em, Ned?"

"Yes, to be sure; my horse is among them."

They hastened around to where the three horses were hitched. Untying them, Ned mounted his own faithful animal and little Kit climbed into the big saddle on one of the other horses. The third horse Nebraska Ned led, and in this manner they made their way down the dark, wooded valley to the ford.

Here, as they emerged into the mellow moonlight, a cry burst from the lips of Eagle Kit.

Nebraska Ned glanced back, and he, too, uttered an exclamation of deep surprise.

On the back of the led horse was seated a man whose presence had been unobserved in the dense darkness!

"Good-evening, gents!" said the man, with all the deliberate coolness of one who knew his presence was expected.

"Great pizen!" exclaimed Kit, whipping out a revolver.

"Put that pill-box away, boy," the man commanded, in an easy sort of a way. "I'm not gorin' to swaller ye—I'm no hungry pirate—I are—"

"Judge Zelotes Prosper!" declared Nebraska Ned; "why, my dear old dare-devil, I am truly glad to meet you."

"And so be I you, boy. By the sword o' Dam-ocles, I ruther expected the oranges and oleanders'd be blowin' over your grave afore another week the way things war goin' once to-night, but I see you pulled through. Boy, I war nigh when you and them gals run into that hornet's nest o' outlaws to-night. And I did my best for you, but in spite of me the varmints got away with you and the gals. But you can jist bet your bottom spondulic I painted a little purgatory on one road-agent's mug quicker nor a bound pup could lick a skillet. Sword o' Dam-ocles! but we tore up the shrubbery like a pair o' speckled bull alligators in a canebrake. A nastier mess hasn't been made o' any critter than I made o' that brigand since Noah's ark swung over the mountain peaks of Asia."

"Then the girls are captives?"

"Yes, they be, Ned, I'm sorry to say. The odds war too big for this court, and when I'd got through with my man the gals war gone."

"How did you git onto that horse?" asked Kit, whose head was just visible above the pommel of his saddle.

"Why, I jist swung on as you started off as easy as a shadow flittin' over a stream. But, I say, boys, this is the dam-ages country for a judicial chap to rusticate in that I ever read of—dangers by the trillion—have to keep myself in battle-trim all the time in order to keep the Car'lina bench of justice from bein' vacated."

The three crossed the river and turned up the stream.

Judge Prosper's tongue rattled away incessantly.

"Ned," he finally asked, "have you see'd anything o' that ole daisy, Perfesser Jimrack, since that night we fust met on the banks o' the Beaver?"

"Nothing, judge; but I learned this evening from Cassandra Markelle that he is in the neighborhood."

"Dam-age his pictures, I've made up my mind that he's not the ginewine goods—the clear quill; and I've been cross with myself ever since that night to think I didn't smash in the pussy old cuss's bay-winder. I'm of the opinion that he's in cahoots with these robbers and road-agents, else he'd never deserted me as he did that night. But say, Ned, who war that gal that war 'ith Mabel to-night?"

"Her name is Cassandra Markelle—Wild Cassandra we call her. She lives at the Agency, and's an all-fired pretty girl, too."

"Oh, ho! then you're in love with her, be you? Well, you remember I told you I war on the look out for a stray gal, the daughter of John Henry Grayson, and that I war to meet one Colonel Blower, and he and I war to look Dakota over, and if we found her set her up with a fortune? Well, 'pose Wild Cassandra's our gal, and she escaped from the outlaws, what'll you do?"

"What should I do but congratulate her on her escape and good fortune? But then Wild Cassandra's not the girl you're after. She's Father Markelle's own child."

"That may be very true, and as I can't do anything intelligently till Blower comes with all details and perticlers, I'll jist amuse myself, as I have been, ramblin' around 'mongst these hills drinkin' in the quiet repose o' nature and sniffin' the balsamic odors and—dodgin' bullets."

"Did you say you had never met Blower?"

"I never met him; a friend o' mine told me 'bout him—says he's the handsomest man in face and form that ever smashed the heart of woman. Oh, I'm to meet the gallant colonel—I am goin' over to the fort in a day or two as the time arranged for our meetin' there's up soon."

"If you arn't a little carefuller you'll not meet him this side o' eternity," said Eagle Kit.

"I'm careful, my kid—don't catch me runnin' my nose into dangers needlessly; but when I do git there, I'm wusser'n a speckled alligator in a canebrake."

"Judge," said Ned, "I want to ask you a question."

"Let her slip."

"Do you know Major Dan Baron?"

"Never see'd him as I know of—why?"

"It was he that attempted to kill you on Beaver Creek the other night."

"The damage it was! well, then he must have the pleasure of knowin' me. I reckon he must be some jolly old gambolier sailin' under false colors—some huckleberry, I expect, that I've sent up some time or other to learn a trade. By the sword o' Damocles! what if it should be Ho—well, I want to see that man, boys. If I'm a stumblin'-block in his way, it might be sich a thing as what I've business with him."

"Just so, judge," replied Ned; "now I begin to mistrust something of the real truth—you, are not what you appear to be."

"Ho, ho, ho!" the old man laughed softly to himself, "so you think I'm an old hypocrite, do ye? Boy, yer mistaken; a truer man to nature, and a juster judge than I hasn't sot in judgment over a constituency since the ark swung into harbor on Ararat."

Thus they rode on till a voice hailed them.

They had come to Dick Rodman and his three companions in waiting for Kit's return.

A few words acquainted them with the situation and also the new acquisition that had been made to their numbers.

Great was the joy over the release of Nebraska Ned; and even those of the party who had once mistrusted the inimical Judge Prosper of double

dealing, forgot the past and received him among them with a hearty good welcome.

Scouts were sent over to watch the robbers' camp in hopes that those expected there by Ned's late captors might bring Mabel and Cassandra with them; but in the course of an hour the scouts returned with the information that the camp was deserted.

The pursuers, accompanied by Ned and Prosper, now moved on, but owing to the darkness and rough condition of the country they were finally compelled to go into camp and wait for daylight. The place selected by Ned for a camp was at the foot of a steep, brushy hill. A fire was lighted to dispel the gloom from their spirits as well as their surroundings. Guards were stationed at three different points to guard the approaches to camp. Mr. Vane sat down silent and sad. Judge Prosper took his position by the fire with the ease and familiarity of one accustomed to the bivouac. He talked away constantly and his humorous stories, ridiculous assertions and whimsical expression flowed like a never-failing stream and drove away much of the gloomy depression weighing upon the hearts and minds of the party.

"Many and many's been the teaching scenes in my court," he finally remarked in extenuation of the conversation; "but never war there such a time as took place at what war known as the 'Wharton murder trial,' and I'll tell ye 'bout it. Jonathan Wharton, a rich old planter, had been murdered, and one Harry Claxton was arrested for the murder on complaint of Jackson Hohn and Clayborne Martin, two nice young gentlemen of enviable reputation. And I might add that Harry Claxton was one of the most highly esteemed and beloved young men in all Car'lina, so when his trial came on the court-room was packed so full that everybody had to breathe at once and then the sides of the buildin' swelled in and out 'th every exhalation. It was awful, I tell you. Public sympathy was all on young Clax's side, but the evidence was all on t'other side. Hohn and Martin swore pint-blank as to seain' him do the bloody deed, in a fit of passion. There wasn't a single iota of rebuttin' evidence, and so, many were the tears shed for poor Harry Claxton, when the jury retired. There could be no help for him—none whatever. The jury was out just ten holy minutes—long enough to suck a lemon and eat a glass o' peanuts. So quick had they arriv' at a verdict that all felt it must have been rendered before the evidence was given, and that Harry must hang. A silence that must have equalled that o' creation's morn reigned in the room while the jury was takin' their seats. Then followed the verdict o' 'not guilty.' Still the silence reigned, for every soul believed he'd not heard aright; but when I, the judge, ordered the jury and the prisoner discharged, the storm bu'st forth. If you can imagine 'bout how it was the day old Noah opened the doors of his ark and his sons and daughters and the beasts and birds therein rushed out and hand in hand and side by side went down the stony sides of Ararat into the green valleys of Asia Minor, singing and shouting, roaring and bellowing, howling and squalling, whistling and fluttering, wriggling and squirming, jumping and flying, you can form a faint conception of the scene in that court-room. Furniture was kicked over and smashed, men danced on the heads of the seethin' crowd; the jury was snatched bald-headed and hugged and pounded with joy; they stood the judge on his head; men kissed each other and other folks's wives, and the wives kissed everybody come-at-able but their own husbands; a hundred bottles leaped into sight as if by magic and turned their bottoms heavenward and shot their sparkling contents dancing and foaming down a hundred thirty throats; forty-seven men sidled up to the judge, and with that knowing, manly wink you have all doubtless witnessed, slipped a bottle into my hand and bade me drink to the health of Harry Claxton; in less than an hour the sheriff had piled the jurymen in his office like so many sticks of cord-wood, all overcome with Harry Claxton's health. I'd 'a' fined every mother's son of 'em if I hadn't been taken down myself with a strange dizziness in my head and a weakness in my legs that I couldn't account for on any other theory than that reaction war settin' in on a high-strung nervous system. Oh! it war a rip-rarin' disgraceful time, you bet. Public opinion, ye see, had carried the jury, and it wer'n't healthy for Hohn and Martin in that section, for several days. But, boys, time went by—that trial was about forgotten, when one day Clayborne Martin lay upon his deathbed and he wanted to balance up accounts so's he could make a good showin',

and what do you s'pose he confessed?—why, may the oleanders bloom over me afore the new moon if he didn't confess that he and Hohn murdered Jonathan Wharton, and had endeavored to fix the crime on young Claxton. But, somehow or other, before we could git the bracelets on Hohn, he got wind of his pard's blow-out and skipped the country; and so ye see Jackson Hohn is wanted—wanted bad—a five thousand dollars' worth. But if he should never be caught on earth, thar's one consolation in knowin' that he'll be russelin' around in purgatory some day, like a bull alligator in a cane-brake."

As the judge concluded Nebraska Ned arose and said:

"Boys, it's time to change the guards; who are the three that next go on duty?"

"I for one," exclaimed Judge Prosper, springing to his feet.

The judge was taken to the top of the bluff overlooking the camp and the man on guard there relieved.

Scarcely had the relief been made at the different points when a yell was heard on top of the hill, and before a man could have time to act, a crashing was heard among the weeds and brush covering the hillside and the next moment Judge Prosper and some unknown foe came whirling and bounding in rapid evolutions down the descent into the glow of the fire, struggling in each other's deadly embrace.

CHAPTER XII.

CAUGHT IN THE OUTLAWS' TRAP.

JUDGE PROSPER and his unknown enemy came up at the foot of the hill within the radius of light. Neither one had taken time or had had an opportunity to draw a knife or pistol, but had grappled on sight, thereby making the conflict a test of physical prowess.

But no sooner, however, had Nebraska Ned got a glimpse of Prosper's foe than he recognized him.

"Hold on here, men!" the young ranger shouted, "you are not foes—hold on, I say."

Three or four men seized the combatants and separated them.

Prosper's antagonist was none other than Professor Jimrack.

By accident, so it seemed, the two men had again met in conflict.

As the two foes rose to their feet with torn, disarranged clothes and their hair on end and their faces flushed with excitement, they glared at each other in contemptuous silence. Prosper was the first to speak.

"You dam-aged old pot-belly!" he fairly hissed, "I've a good mind to rid the earth of your presence."

"It takes a better man than's in your clothes to hold a full hand with this scientific chap," retorted Jimrack.

"You're a handsome critter, professor, you are, by the sword of Damocles! You didn't desert me t'other night, did ye? ye hav'n't been skulkin' round this kentry like a coyote, have ye? Ye didn't git bounced quicker nor a bound pup could lick a skillet for sneakin' round here while ago, did ye? didn't like to git that bay winder smashed in, did ye? Oh, no! you're a holy nabob just out o' fresh clover—a sweet-scented wall-flower from Jerusalem—a speckled alligator 'mong swamp angels; that's what you be."

"And you," said the professor, thoughtfully, "are a small species of the genus jackass—noted for braying."

"Professor, draw your pistol and defend yerself," said Prosper laying his hand on the butt of his derringer; "this court brooks no contempt. The oranges and oleanders—"

"Hold on here, gentlemen!" interrupted a voice, and three men, strangers to all but the Boy Rangers, came hurrying into camp.

Nebraska Ned recognized them as men from the Agency—the spokesman of whom was Andre Markelle, Wild Cassandra's father.

"Hullo, gentlemen," said Ned advancing to meet them, "glad to meet you—what do you know of these men?"

"I know Professor Jimrack to be an honest, upright man," replied Markelle; "he joined us to-day in our search for my lost child, poor little Cassandra."

"Then there is some mistake here, gentlemen," said Mr. Vane addressing the foes.

"That's what I think, and Jimrack's that mistake," said Prosper with a contemptuous look at the professor, then turning he walked away and seating himself on the opposite side of the fire, began whetting a long knife on the sole of his shoe.

From Nebraska Ned, Andre Markelle learned

that his daughter was in the hands of the outlaws. He knew she was in trouble when she failed to return home from her usual daily ride to the hills; and when Professor Jimrack arrived at the Agency and reported where he had met her, Markelle became satisfied she had met with trouble and at once started in search of her.

Mr. Vane and Markelle talked over their trouble together: their sorrow was mutual.

"Where is our Indian?" Professor Jimrack finally asked, seeing one of his party had not appeared.

"He'll be in by-and-by."

"What Indian? Macomah, my old friend and companion?" Eagle Kit asked.

"Yes."

"Ho! good for Macomah!" the little dwarf shouted in glee, "it's been a long time since he left the Erie. I reckon he's got scent of the destroyer of his child; and if he has, boys, you kin jist bet your last knife that he'll make it bloody. Ah! here he comes now."

A powerful Indian with a red blanket about his shoulders strode slowly into camp. Eagle Kit advanced to meet him for it was his friend Macomah.

Judge Prosper started up and with a furtive eye searched the Indian's face.

"Macomah," said the dwarf, "I'm awful glad to meet you here for it's not often you leave our home. Why have you come down? to wreak that vengeance you have nursed so long in your—"

"Hush! hush!" the Indian said impetuously, "Eagle Kit forgets what Macomah has taught him—that the wind and the trees and the rocks have ears."

"Well, how's Whirlwind, then? did he come home?"

The Indian nodded in the affirmative as he fixed his little, black sunken eyes upon the fire with all the characteristic gravity and stoicism of the American Indian.

Nebraska Ned finally sat down by Judge Prosper and the two entered into conversation.

"It 'pears as though the outlaws and road-agents are gittin' the upper hand o' things in these diggins, Ned," said Prosper.

"Yes, they have been running things their own way the last year. The Rocky Mountain Detective Association has been promisin' to send that noted scout and mountain detective, Jack Drew, and a force up here to clear out Middleton's gang; but it seems we're only to have promises. You've heard of Jack Drew, hav'n't you, judge?"

"Jack Drew? It seems to me I have."

"He's one of the greatest detectives in the West. He's to the prairies and mountains what Allan Pinkerton is to the great cities of the East. But I think we've force enough now to cope with all the outlaws in these hills."

"I think so, Ned, and are anxious to be movin', for I fear them gals are gettin' furdur and furdur away every hour, and may git beyond human power to save 'em. I are anxious also, to know more 'bout that gal, Cassandra—whether she really is Markelle's child or not. I'll have a talk with him arter while 'bout her, and if she's not his own born child mebbe she's the very larkie me and Colonel Blower 'd like to find. If the colonel comes 'round on time and I are not at Scully to meet him, as per arrangements, he may pull out and I'll not git to see him. I ought to be on my way to the fort this minute, but I can't leave you folks till I know them gals are either dead or out of them villains' power."

At this juncture Professor Jimrack rose and walking over to where Ned and Prosper sat, said:

"Gents, you'll please excuse me; but I overheard your conversation jist now and—"

"Oh-ho! so you're eavesdroppin' are ye?" responded Prosper, interrupting the professor.

"I heard you mention the name of Colonel Blower, and then say somethin' 'bout meetin' him at Scully."

"Well, what's that to you?"

"I hope you're not the man Blower's expectin' to meet."

The judge sprang to his feet and glaring into the face of Jimrack as though a startling truth was forcing itself upon his mind, blurted out:

"Who the devil are you?"

"I are Colonel Gamaliel Blower," replied the professor.

"Sword of Damocles! and I, colonel, am Jack Drew," said Prosper.

There was a momentary silence. The look of a guilty conscience was upon the two men's faces. They clasped hands and burst into a peal of hearty laughter.

The crowd gathered around them in speechless amazement.

"Colonel Blower," said the judge, "what a dam-aged mess of fools you've been makin' of yourself, man."

"Joe Miller, the d-dashed wag's to blame for it all. He said Jack Drew the noted scout and mountain detective was the handsomest man in America, when the fact is Jack Drew is the most ungodly, ungainly and homeliest-looking man that ever caught a road-agent or shot a buffalo; if Joe'd told me the truth I'd known ye on sight. Gentlemen," and the colonel turned to the astonished crowd, "let me introduce to you Jack Drew, the noted scout and mountain detective."

"Ha, Jack, you old rascal," exclaimed Ned, grasping the man's hand, "I always told you you were not what you pretended to be."

The next ten minutes were spent in shaking hands with Jack Drew, for he Judge Prosper really was. All had heard of this noted man, and their previous acquaintance with Judge Prosper had nothing whatever to do with meeting another man in the same person.

The faces of the two detectives still bore evidence of their first encounter on Beaver Creek as well as their last one; but now that they understood each other they were as warm in their friendship as they had been bitter in their hostilities. They frankly admitted that, skillful as they were as detectives in ferreting out crime, in reading human nature and almost the very thoughts of man, they had been the victims of an innocent deception of a waggish friend who, knowing the peculiarities and eccentricities of both, described one to the other the very opposite of what he was. So that one expected to meet a handsome, dashing fellow when they met at Scully. The fact of their having assumed fictitious names completed the joke of their friend; which joke came very near resulting in the death of the two detectives.

"Well, my dear Jack," said the colonel, after they had fully discussed the ludicrous attitude they had maintained against each other to such a ridiculous extent, "you have played the role of Judge Zelotes Prosper handsomely, and told some monstrous lies, and amused the boys; but while thus engaged I've been busy looking up our girl, and, sir, I have found her."

"The speckled alligators! ye don't say?"

"It's a fact: I run across a young, black-eyed witch the other day, and, sir, she pulled a deringer on me—made me hoist my hands, outlaw style, took me prisoner and marched me off down the road. Of course, I was dashed willing to go with her, for I wanted to find out who she was; but when she saw I was willing to go, she broke into a peal of bewitching laughter and galloped off and left me standing there like a stone statue representing surprise and astonishment. The girl was Wild Cassandra, and Wild Cassandra is the daughter of the dead John Henry Grayson."

"Well, I've been thinkin' she might be all along," replied Jack Drew as we will hereafter know Judge Prosper, "and have been waitin' a chance to speak to Markelle. But now the fust things to git the gal; then the next thing is somethin' else. You remember, colonel, some critter attempted to shoot me the night we'd our fust acquaintance on Beaver Creek!—Well, I've learnt since that that critter was one Major Baron—the leader of the train now encamped at Honey Creek. Since that time it has also been developed that Baron was once an outlaw chief and sailed under the name of Captain Handsome. He is now at large in these hills in conspiracy against Miss Vane, and I want to interview him. He's an old rooster sailin' under false colors; and it seems that I am in his way. He must know me—knows my business and dynamite proclivities and thinks I'm after him. Perhaps I am."

By this time the night was well advanced, though not an eye had been closed in slumber. In fact, no one was sleepy, but all patiently awaited the coming of day.

With the first red streaks of morning dawn every man and boy was astir. Breakfasting on cold meat and bread, they crossed the river and began their tramp through the hills.

About noon the eagle eye of little Kit discovered a trail which he had every reason to believe was the one made by the maiden's captors. Nebraska Ned and Dick Rodman were of the same opinion, and the finding of a faded ribbon which Mr. Vane recognized as one worn on his daughter's hair, confirmed the opinion of the three young rangers, and so the party at once set out to follow up the trail which ran through a narrow gloomy pass, winding and

twisting its tortuous way among the dark-browed hills and beetling crags.

Macomah, Eagle Kit and Nebraska Ned acted as scouts, keeping along the ridges and high ground where they could see that no ambush was laid for them.

It was nearly sunset when the party debouched into a little circular valley with high, perpendicular bluffs. Here to their surprise they found their advance cut off. The narrow outlet or rift at the head of the valley had been filled to the very top—forty feet high—with huge stones and boulders that no human power could move. The only way out of the valley was by the way they had entered. It was time to go into camp. A consultation was held. All were present except Macomah, and he was momentarily expected. Some were in favor of encamping in the valley, but the more experienced objected. They felt no little uneasiness over their situation for they saw that the outlet at the head of the valley had been quite recently blocked—no doubt by the robbers to enable them to entrap their pursuers or else to cover their own retreat, by stopping pursuit for the time being.

It was finally decided to retrace their steps a mile or two and go into camp; but as they turned to depart, the figure of a man in high topped boots, slouched hat, blue shirt with open collar and with a revolver in hand, boldly appeared on a ledge near the entrance to the valley and shouted out:

"Halt there, gentlemen! you have bearded the lion in his den and the movement of a finger by any of you will be the signal for your destruction!"

As he concluded, he pointed downward where, along the base of the cliff grew a fringe of bushes and vines, and through this green foliage our friends saw half a score of gleaming rifle-barrels leveled full upon them!

CHAPTER XIII.

A TERRIBLE VENGEANCE.

A DEATHLY silence reigned within the little valley, or what might more properly be termed the crater or mouth of an extinct volcano, for the surrounding country had every appearance of having once been disturbed by volcanic action.

The outlaw on the ledge still stood stock-still in his defiant attitude—his eyes fixed upon our friends, his revolver clutched in his right hand while with his left he pointed down at his concealed friends whose rifle-barrels gleamed murderously through the shrubbery.

Our friends saw that they were taken at a great disadvantage, in fact, that they were at the mercy of the outlaws, standing where they could be shot down like sheep.

"Drop your guns and pistols!" was the next demand from the villain on the ledge, seeing that his advantage had impressed itself upon the minds of the entrapped party.

"Say, mister, what d'ye take us for?" retorted old Jack Drew, in hopes of creating a diversion in the situation, that would at least give them a chance to fight for their lives: "if you'll come out and give us a fair whiff we'll lick the hull of you quicker nor a hound pup could lick a skillet."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the outlaw defiantly, "a mountaineer never begs quarter—he expects none—he gives none—and now—"

He did not finish the sentence for at this juncture some great, dark object rolled over the edge of the cliff above, and came thundering down the face of the cliff, starting an avalanche of stone and dirt directly over the heads of the outlaws.

"Look out, men!" cried the villain on the ledge glancing up and seeing his danger; but they were the last words he ever uttered. A huge rock crashed down upon him and fairly ground him into a pulp.

Those concealed at the base of the cliff leaped through their covering of foliage, to escape the rain of death, into plain view of our friends.

The latter instantly saw their advantage and hastened to improve it.

Drawing their revolvers they opened a fire on the startled outlaws. But the latter were not cowards by any means. They knew it was a case of life or death and they met their foe in a deadly struggle.

For the next minute the "ping" and "bark" of pistols and revolvers, the shouts of the combatants, and the groans of the dying, started a hundred echoes rolling and rebounding and crashing through the hills. And in the midst of the conflict a little figure appeared on the ledge where the outlaw had been crushed by the falling stone, and waving a bright cart above its head cheered the men on to victory.

If was the figure of a girl—it was Wild Cassandra. Her voice and presence gave new strength to the arms, and new courage to the hearts of her friends, and they fought as men never fought before.

In two minutes' time the conflict had ended. Taken as they were—notwithstanding they had every advantage at first, the outlaw band was totally annihilated. Every man was either killed or wounded; but our friends had not gained a bloodless victory. Two of their party had been killed, and every man and boy, with the single exception of Eagle Kit, had received wounds of a more or less serious nature.

As soon as the conflict had ended, Andre Markelle ran to where his daughter stood upon the ledge, breathing a prayer of thanks for her deliverance.

"Oh, father!" cried the fearless, excited girl clapping her hands in ecstasy of joy. "I am so thankful you licked them robbers! Oh, but it was the jolliest fight I ever saw! You just knocked them robbers a tumbling like as I heard 'em say they were going to fix you. Oh, but I was in a stew when I couldn't get away to warn you!"

"Cassandra," cried Dick Rodman who had followed Markelle with Mr. Vane, "where is Mabel Vane?"

"I left her in the cave," replied the fearless girl; "come up quick and help her for there's two old robbers in there yet—one's the fellow I wounded t'other night—come up, quick."

Eagle Kit clambered up the cliff to the ledge like a cat and was followed by Jack Drew, Nebraska Ned and Dick Rodman, and guided by the brave little girl they entered a dark cavernous retreat—the home of the robber band. They soon came to where a light was burning but no sign of human life was visible.

"I left Mabel right here," said Cassandra, a tremor in her voice.

Then the thoughtless maiden called aloud the name of the absent girl, but only her own voice, wild and weird, was echoed back to her ears.

"They have fled with her! Oh, poor Mabel! they have fled with her when the battle went against their friends!"

This was undoubtedly the case, and while the outlaws with the girl could not be far away, night had set in and little could be accomplished in attempting to follow them for they had the advantage of knowing every secret pathway and hiding-place thereabouts.

Hastening back to the crater the party reported the desertion of the cavern and disappearance of Mabel.

The news fell like a thunderbolt on Mr. Vane's ears.

While discussing the situation, Jack Drew suddenly exclaimed:

"Look up yonder, boys!"

All lifted their eyes and upon the edge of the crater saw a human form outlined against the sky. It was the form of an Indian.

"Hol!" cried Eagle Kit, "that's Macomah! that's Macomah! Isn't he the boss Injun of robber-land? Folks, he's the high-muchawack that started that avalanche that smashed that roarin' ole robber and that routed them others and gave us a royal ole victory!"

"Three cheers for Macomah!" yelled Colonel Blower, and right heartily did his companions and the old mountain res pond.

Half an hour later the Indian joined them in the crater.

"Git, gals?" he asked.

"Only one of them: the other was carried away by two wounded villains that Cassandra says remained behind to guard the girls when the others went forth to do battle."

"Where little Kit?" Macomah asked.

No one answered for no one knew. Without saying a word, the little dwarf had slipped away in the darkness.

Half an hour later Macomah had disappeared as silently and as mysteriously as the Dwarf Demon.

"They're a strange pair, a dam-aged strange pair," said the old detective, Jack Drew.

It was found impossible for our friends to leave the crater that night. Their dead must be buried and their wounded cared for.

The latter were removed to the outlaws' cave. Colonel Blower acted as surgeon.

Guards were stationed to watch the approaches to the cave. Our friends were not out of all danger. Without extra precaution those of Middleton's gang that had been laying siege to the train at the mouth of Honey Creek might return and taking advantage of some secret entrance, pounce upon the party and wreak a terrible revenge for the death of their friends in the crater.

CHAPTER XIV.

PURSUED BY A NEMESIS.

The two outlaws left in the cavern to guard the captives, Mabel and Cassandra, while the others went forth to destroy their enemies by the trap set for them in the crater, were both wounded—one but slightly in the arm the other seriously in the hand. The latter was Major Daniel Baron whose wound had been inflicted by a bullet from the pistol of Wild Cassandra in the pass two evenings before when she had thwarted his attempt to abduct Mabel Vane.

This consummate villain finding himself exposed had sought the companionship of his old friends in sin and crime who gave him a hearty welcome back to their ranks; and when Mabel Vane was brought to the cave he felt he was the victor after all. But all his gentlemanly and lover-like deportment toward the girl had changed. What he had failed to gain by such a course he now resolved to possess in defiance of her feelings or wishes and the power of her friends. All the brutality, cruelty and deception inherent in the man's very nature began to crop out. He would have strangled Wild Cassandra if he had dared to, for to her he attributed not only the pain he was suffering from his lacerated hand, but the frustration of his attempt to abduct Mabel Vane.

Having no doubt of the success of the trap set in the crater for the destruction of those known to be in search of the girls, Baron was in fine spirits; and when the crash of firearms rolled into the cavern striking terror to the hearts of the maidens, he paced the floor of the cavern with an impatient step and a sickly smile of fiendish delight upon his face.

The girls were not ignorant of the trapset for their friends, and while the sound of battle still rung loud, Wild Cassandra sprung to her feet and before her guard could prevent it, she bounded away through the passage to the ledge overlooking the scene of conflict. The outlaw started in pursuit of her, but he soon returned without her, his face the very picture of horror.

"Where is that hyena?" asked Baron.

"Great God, captain!" replied the outlaw with chattering teeth, "the trap failed—the battle has gone against the mountaineers—every man has been shot down—even Lieutenant Dareall!"

"Ruffcorn, you are jesting!" exclaimed Baron excitedly.

"I am not—hear those fellows shout! come, we must get out of here at once; they will soon come swarmin' in upon us!"

"Ruff, mount a horse and take this girl—take her to the cave where our old head-quarters were in '69 and a thousand dollars shall be your reward. I would not ask this favor had I the use of both my hands. Go, Ruff, and I will strike across the country afoot and meet you at the cave."

Half carried and half dragged, the fainting form of Mabel was forced away through the dark cavern into a narrow open rift that finally led into another cave or grotto where several horses were stabled.

Baron guarded the maiden while Ruffcorn brought out a strong-limbed horse fully equipped for its double burden.

Mounting the animal, Mabel was taken up and placed in front of the outlaw, who, putting spurs, galloped away.

Baron now found himself alone—an outlaw, an outcast—a wounded fugitive without a soul in the world that he could call a friend. At least his guilty conscience made him feel so. His own perfidy, baseless passion, and depravity of soul had driven a host of warm, admiring friends away from him, and his mind became so wrought upon by his guilt that in fancy he could hear the stealthy tread of an enemy in every sound or see a crouching form in every changing shadow.

Out in the mountains he had good opportunity for reflection, as he moved on he scarcely knew where. He had journeyed perhaps a mile when a sound startled him. He stopped, he peered into the gloom with contracted brows. Then he started, for he was sure he saw the outlines of a moving form—a form that resembled that of an Indian.

He was afraid to speak, for fear his voice might direct the bullet of an enemy toward him, and so he turned and moved on.

Now and then he glanced back over his shoulder and either in reality or in a highly wrought fancy, he knew not which, he could still see that shadowy form following him.

Up hill and down, along dark valleys and through black defiles the fugitive sped on, and yet it made no difference how fast he went, how shadowy were his ways, how silent his

movements, that pursuing Nemesis was ever close behind.

In spite of his efforts to the contrary, his crimes now came trooping up from the past in review before his mind. The faces of his victims seemed staring at him from every bush, from every rock. As one face in particular, that of a beautiful Indian maiden whose life and happiness he had destroyed, came up before his mental vision, he started, glanced quick around him. To him there seemed a mysterious affinity between that dusky face and his phantom-like pursuer. He quickened his pace—he broke into a run. In his left hand he clasped a long knife, for his right hand was in a sling.

Like a wounded deer close pressed by the hunter he sped on, until finally overcome with exhaustion, he crept into a clump of bushes under a projecting rock and stretched himself panting upon the earth.

And here he lay through the night shivering with terror—dreading to see the light of day come again. But it came, and not until the sun was up, and the birds were singing did he venture forth from his concealment.

Creeping out he advanced to the edge of a little pool of water fed by a purling stream and glared around him with burning face and blood-shot eyes.

Few of his late friends would have recognized the man as the gallant "Major" Baron of a few days previous. But he it was with the brand of shame, terror and crime stamped upon every lineament of his features. His clothes were in tatters, his head was hatless, his face lacerated and bloody, and his hand still in a sling.

Dropping on his knees at the edge of the pool he stooped to slake his burning thirst; but he started back with a cry ere his parched lips touched the water. The limpid pool seemed to rebuke and reproach of his crimes, for it revealed to his startled gaze a human face that was not his own, mirrored in its glassy depths. It was the reflection of a face peering over the ledge above him. It was the face of an Indian. It was the face of Macomah.

Without even moistening his shriveled lips, the fugitive rose quickly to his feet, leaped the pool like a startled buck and plunged into the woods on the opposite side.

A fierce yell that started the morning echoes for miles pealed from the lips of Macomah, and then down from the cliff he came bounding, and with glowing eyes, contorted face and crouching form shot away through the valley in pursuit of Baron.

The fugitive kept to the level valley until he saw his foe was gaining upon him, when he bore to the left and followed the spur of a ridge leading in among rocks and canyons, where he hoped to elude the Indian.

Without observing them the fugitive finally sped close past a party of a dozen persons who were standing under a cluster of stunted pines.

These persons were our friends whom we left the night previous in the crater at the entrance of the robbers' cave.

Jack Drew had seen the fugitive coming and imposed silence upon his friends, although he did not recognize the man.

Scarcely a minute had elapsed after Baron passed them ere Macomah, with arms and shoulders bare and bleeding from contact with bush and brier, his teeth set, his eyes glowing and his face fairly knotted and seamed with the awful intensity of his savage vengeance, glided along in pursuit of him.

"By the sword of Damocles!" exclaimed Jack Drew when Macomah had passed, "it seems to me I have seen that fugitive before, notwithstanding he looks as tho' he'd been fighting with a speckled alligator."

"Jack, that was Major Baron," said Nebraska Ned, who alone had recognized the fleeing man.

"Major Thunder!" exclaimed Drew. "I have it now, sir; I know who that man is—it's all clear as a bell; there's a reward on his head, Gamaliel Blower—a big reward. Folks, you remember I was tellin' you a story t'other night 'bout the murder of Jonathan Wharton, and the racket that war kicked up in court when Claxton, the alleged murderer was set free by the jury, don't you? Well, you remember then that the main witnesses for the prosecution war one Hohn and one Martin! and that on his death-bed Martin confessed that he and Hohn did the murder? Well, with the single exception of my being judge, every word of that story war true, and what's more that man that just passed us is the murderer, Hohn."

"The nation you say, Jack!" exclaimed Colonel Blower.

"I do say it, colonel: but Lord John Rodgers,

if that big Ingin gits a holt of him he'll snatch him into eternity quicker nor a hound pup can lick a skillet."

"Oh, meebby if he's taken alive he can tell where Mabel is!" exclaimed Wild Cassandra.

"True, very true," said Mr. Vane, whose heart was breaking with grief for his lost child.

The party hurried forward fast as was possible.

The two enemies, Baron and Macomah, were now out of sight. They had sped away like a deer and a hound before any one had time to speak.

Nebraska Ned and Jack Drew left their friends and hurried on after them. They had not gone over fifty rods when they heard a frightful yell in the woods before them.

"By the speckled alligators," said Old Jack, "I reckon as what that yelp means that them Trojans have come together."

They ran on but could see nothing of the foes.

But suddenly they came upon two human forms lying locked in each other's arms silent and motionless.

An exclamation burst from Ned's lips.

"Too late!" he said.

"Ay; they have balanced accounts and gone over the river."

Quiet in death, with a knife in Macomah's heart and the iron grasp of the Indian upon the throat of Dan Baron—the horrors of a terrible vengeance upon the face of the one and a desperate fear on that of the other—lay the two as they had fallen.

When the rest of the party came up, Andre Markelle became deeply affected over the death of Macomah.

"He was the noblest Indian that ever lived," he said; "but all he has lived for the past few years has been revenge—revenge upon the destroyer of his happiness. This he has had; that man Baron was the object of his vengeance, and now his soul has gone to join that of his daughter in Spirit land. Poor Macomah!"

"Thus Jackson Hohn, alias Daniel Baron, has paid the penalty of all earthly wrongs, deceptions and crimes," said Jack Drew, "the gallows has been cheated out of a victim and I out of a reward of five thousand dollars."

"So be it," said Colonel Blower.

The two enemies were buried where they had fallen, and then the party resumed its journey eastward through the hills.

All of their friends could now be accounted for except Mabel Vane and Eagle Kit. The latter had not been seen or heard of since his mysterious disappearance the evening before; yet all felt certain that he would turn up in due time, and be able to give an account of his absence.

The party were not leaving the hills by the route they had come. They were following a way nearest to the open prairie which they reached late in the afternoon that day.

All breathed an air of relief when they had emerged from the shadows and dangers of the hills; but the fate of Mabel Vane weighed heavy upon their minds and hearts.

It had been previously understood that upon reaching the prairie with Cassandra and those who were suffering from wounds received in the battle in the crater, Nebraska Ned, Dick Rodman and Old Jack Drew were to return to the hills and continue the search for Mabel, while the others continued on toward camp on Honey Creek.

This arrangement was carried into effect as soon as the prairie was reached, Old Jack and the Boy Rangers turning back; and when night fell, they were again under cover of the lonely hills.

CHAPTER XV.

JACK DREW'S STORY.

It was the intention of Jack Drew and the Boy Rangers to return at once to the vicinity of the outlaws' retreat, in hopes of finding some trace of Eagle Kit or Mabel Vane, or both; and if they failed in this their next purpose was to watch the movements of the surviving robbers in hopes of tracking them to some other refuge where the boy and girl might be prisoners. Three of the wounded outlaws were left in the cave that they might inform their returning friends of the discovery of their retreat and the death of most of their band.

To the disappointment of Old Jack and the boys, however, the sky became overcast with dark clouds soon after nightfall, blotting out moon and stars and rendering it so dark they were finally compelled to go into camp.

Under some low, stunted trees they stopped to wait the dark hours of night away.

"Is this your first visit, Jack, in these parts?" Nebraska Ned asked in the course of their conversation.

"Oh, no; I war here before Nebraska Ned war ever heard of in these parts—some ten years ago, and the most torturin' hour of my whole existence war passed not over ten miles from here."

"Indeed?" responded Dick Rodman; "well, let us hear about it."

"D'ye know whar Sentinel Buttes are?" asked the old man.

"Yes, indeed; we've been on the Sentinel many a time."

"Wal, it war thar—at the Sentinel—that I had sich a blisterin' time o' it, and it war this way: I war scout for the military expedition sent out under General C—, to subdue the hostile Sioux under Sitting Bull. We knew we were in the vicinity of the Indians' encampment; but didn't know exactly whar it war located, and as the red-skins had ten men to our one we had to go a little cautiously. So I told the general that I'd make my way to the Sentinel, mount it and if I could see the Indians anywhere, signal to him their position. The general assented and away I went toward that rocky shaft risin' up out o' the summit o' that butte like a weather-beaten tower of Babel. I reached the foot of the butte, clambered up its steep side to the base of the stone shaft that rises almost a hundred feet straight up into the air."

"From the top of this shaft I knew I could see fifty miles, more or less, with a glass; but I seed' at once it'd take some careful climbin' to reach it, and so I took off my coat, removed my belt and pistols and hid them with my rifle under some briars, that I might be as free of all incumbrances as possible. Then I took a fresh chew o' tobacco, rolled up my shirt sleeves and begun climbin' the Sentinel. I stepped from niche to niche, swung from ledge to ledge—slowly, but surely I went upward."

"At length I landed pantin' on the summit o' the Sentinel there to meet with the most startlin' sight I ever beheld. You see the summit o' the shaft is almost level and perhaps ten feet across in the widest place, and just as I planted myself on one side of this crag, an Indian warrior in war-paint planted his self on the opposite side before me."

"By the avengin' sword o' Gideon! you'd a busted yourself to 'a' seed' us critters. It war hard to tell which war the wust s'prised. How we'd both got there without discoverin' each other war a complete mystery. We both involuntarily fumbled at our sides for war-tools, but true as I'm sittin' here, neither one o' us had even a toothpick. In fact, the Injun had no clothes on 'cept his moccasins and breech-cloth."

"Well, we glared at each other 'bout one minute in perfect silence; then I begun to realize the situation: the Injun war one of Sitting Bull's scouts sent to the top o' the Sentinel to watch the movements o' our soldiers. He war a whale, too—muscled like a speckled alligator, and I had an inklin' that he could boss me in a hand-to-hand encounter, for he had the advantage of weight; but I swelled myself up, and put on sich a bold front that I guess I made him think that I could send him over that crag quicker nor a bound pup could lick a skillet. At any rate, each seemed afraid to attack the other; for I knew, and of course the Injun did, too, that there wer'n't room on that peak for us to fight out a hand-to-hand fight, and that we'd roll off and be smashed into crow-bait at the foot of the rock."

"What in the name of Simon and Peter am I to do? I axed myself. Just then I saw over the Indian's shoulder the host of Sitting Bull encamped along in a little ravine waitin' for our soldiers. I finally concluded to open a conversation with the Injun. 'Hullo, red-skin,' I said. 'Ugh!' war his contemptuous reply. 'Ye didn't spect me here, did ye?' I axed. 'Waugh! pale-face scout come to watch Sioux,' war his correct rejoinder. 'And I reckon you jist come here to air your sweet-scented self? I shoved at him. 'Now, Injun,' I went on, 'if you want to fight me right here wade into the canebrake—I'm your speckled alligator from the Dismal Swamp,' and I rolled my sleeves higher."

"The Injun crouched slightly, as if to spring upon me, but I braced myself for the charge; but I soon seen he war afraid I war goin' to bounce him, and war bracin' hisself for the worst. And thus we maneuvered. I war never in sich a pickle in my life, and I seed' I must out-gineral that Injun some way or other if I ever got down from that crag alive; so I re-

solved to talk compromise, and said: 'Ingin, lookey here, if you want to git down, I promise you on the word of a white Christian gentleman I'll not molest you. You see this crag's too small to hold us both.' 'Pale-face git down—Silentfoot no harm him—Silentfoot good Ingin—no crooked tongue,' war the Ingin's fair promise, and yit I never knew an Ingin in my life but war a Ananiason liar. 'I don't want to git down yit,' I replied. 'Me no want to neider,' put back the warrior. 'Ar'n't you a scout, Silentfoot?' I questioned. 'Me jist like pale-face—he come watch Injun—Injin come watch him,' war the honest response. 'Well, what ye goin' to do?' I went on. 'Nothin' if pale-face don't,' he answered, stubborn as a mule. 'All right,' I exclaimed, 'I will set up here till we starve to death or the buzzards pack us off,' and by way of emphasizin' my remarks I swung my arm aloft and smote my palm furiously; but, boys, I had the Ingin there, for that very motion of my arm war the signal agreed upon between me and the general for a 'forward' movement. And General C—, with spy-glass in hand ten miles away, read the sign; though the Ingin never mistrusted any thing at the time; but after I'd gesticulated my arms 'round there for several minutes by way of strengthenin' my promises to that red morning-glory, and had communicated all that I wanted to to the soldiers, the Ingin interposed an objection, and said: 'Pale-face talk too much with arms.' 'All hunky,' I replied, and I dropped my arms to my side and fixed my eyes on that warrior to see that he didn't give any signs to his folks; but he stood there stock-still all the time with his little snake-eyes glaring right into mine, as if to read my thoughts."

"Now, boys, I never war afraid o' any man on top o' the green sod, nor I don't believe that Injun war, but we war both afraid o' our situation. Death was sure for both of us just as sure as we laid hands on each other unless one had every advantage which neither was likely to get, for one wouldn't trust t'other's words and promises furdern' you, an sling a speckled alligator by the tail. So all we could do was stand with eye fixed steadily upon eye, and thus we did stand for over an hour. Knowin' the dogged patience of the American Injun as I did, I war beginnin' to be afraid the heathen would wear me out, when, all to once he started, his eyes dilated and a tremor of excitement seemed to shake his whole form. At the same time I thought I heard a slight noise behind me, and the first thought that struck me war that another Ingin war mountin' the Sentinel behind me."

"Then I war, that my soul war tried. Great drops of cold sweat poured from my brow. I strained my ears to catch a true meanin' of that noise. I dare not look back—dar'n't move even an eye, and yet I expected to be seized every moment and hurled over that crag. I'd 'a' give my right eye if I could have had it transplanted on the back of my head at that moment. I saw the Ingin was growin' more excited and nervous every instant, and I made up my mind that he war gatherin' his strength for to spring, tiger-like, upon me."

"In that I was not mistaken for all o' a sudden a cry burst from his lips and at the same instant he shot through the air toward me; but I war not nappin' and I sprung aside and just as he passed me I gave him a blow on the side of the head. He had not calculated on this movement, and the next thing he knew he war strugglin' to maintain his equilibrium on the edge of the crag, but he didn't maintain, for I planted another catapultian blow at the butt of his ear that sent him spinnin' over the cliff to destruction; and the scream that went trailin' down through the air from his lips I shall never forget to my dying day."

"As I war now boss o' the situation I glanced around me and at once saw what had been the cause of the Ingin's attack upon me. The soldiers under General C— were approachin'. They were not over a mile away. Silentfoot had seen them over my shoulder."

"When I descended to the ground I found that Ingin all mashed into a pulp, and of all—" "Hark! 'sh!" suddenly exclaimed Nebraska Ned, as a sound fell upon his ears."

They listened. Clattering hoofs swept down the valley past them."

A female cry came faintly to their ears."

The three started to their feet."

"My God! that was a woman's cry!"—perhaps Mabel Vane's!" exclaimed Dick Rodman."

The hoof-strokes died away in the distance. Our friends were left in an agony of doubt and suspense."

The darkness was so intense that they could not follow the horseman."

They could only sit down and await the coming of the day."

CHAPTER XVI.

"LAST SCENE OF ALL."

DICK RODMAN was right when he suggested that the woman's cry they had heard might be Mabel Vane's, for it was Mabel's indeed."

The poor girl was still in the power of the outlaw Ruffcorn whom Baron had employed to carry her to some distant point."

All day the outlaw had skulked among the shadows of the hills waiting for the darkness of night to cover his flight, and when the night came it was so intensely dark that he was compelled to take an out-of-the-way course to get out of the hills because it was more familiar to him. But when he reached the open plain he was compelled to stop. There were no landmarks by which to travel, and as his course now lay for miles across the prairie, he had to await the coming of day."

The villain was very considerate of Mabel's comfort. He gave her his blanket to sleep upon and protect her from the chilly night air. He treated her, in every respect, as kindly as could be expected; but he offered her no promise—no hope for her life and liberty."

By daylight next morning they were moving north-east across the plain. Mabel, by her own request, was permitted to ride behind the outlaw on the horse's croup."

To their left and behind them lay the dark hills; to their right and before them an interminable prairie rolled away in the distance broken only by a single object, and that was Sentinel Butte, the same upon which Jack Drew and the Indian Silentfoot had met years before. There were, in fact, a group of several small buttes or mounds at that point, but the "Sentinel" was the one conspicuous for the height and shaft-like appearance of the rocky crag rising straight from the top of the butte a hundred feet into the air. It was one of the strangest freaks of nature to be met with on the plain, and as seen in the distance reminded one of a Brobdingnagian giant keeping ward and watch over the plain."

There was nothing, however, in the sight of the Sentinel to offer consolation to Mabel Vane; but as they approached it, she noticed a great bird circling in the air above it, and it occurred to her at once that it might be Eagle Kit's Whirlwind, or Hurricane as he sometimes called his eagle; and if it were, might little Kit, himself not be near?"

The thought kindled a spark of hope in her breast."

The outlaw noticed the bird, also, and manifested no little interest in its movements, for there was not an outlaw in the hills but what had a superstitious fear of Eagle Kit and his bird; for, where one was found the other was not far away."

With his eyes upon the bird the outlaw rode on with his captive. They were nearing the Sentinel when suddenly a bullet whistled past the head of the robber and the report of a rifle rung out on the air."

A little puff of smoke rising from the grass to his right, told the outlaw from whence the shot had come; but instead of trying to ride the unknown foe down, Ruffcorn turned to flee when he saw six forms rise up in the grass beyond the smoke and glide toward it with an unearthly yell."

They were Indians—outlaw Indians—and the allies of the white robbers. They had been hanging along the edge of the plain watching for whatever of human prey they could seize upon. They were ever ready to do the vilest and bloodiest work the white outlaws might ask them to do."

Mabel saw the Indians and a shudder of terror convulsed her form. She knew not that they were friends of her captor, and that she and the villain were not the object of their excitement until she saw a little figure, scarcely a head taller than the grass, spring up and glide away like an antelope followed by five of the Indians."

The sixth Indian came toward them. When within speaking distance they addressed each other familiarly."

"Eagle Kit, the Dwarf Demon will not escape this time," the Indian said, regarding Mabel with a leering smile of curiosity."

All was clear enough now to Mabel's mind. The little figure she had seen running through the grass, pursued by the Indians, was Eagle Kit. It was he whose shot came so near freeing her from outlaw power."

Inwardly she prayed for the little fellow's

escape from the savages, but the chances seemed against him. The odds were six to one.

Straight toward the Sentinel Butte the boy ran. He soon reached it—sped up the hill to the rocky shaft, then paused and looked back.

The Indians were coming close behind him.

Like a young mountain goat the boy began to climb the rocky shaft. From ledge to ledge he sprang, sure-footed and true. Up and up he went—up until he stood upon the top of the great stone giant.

The Indian who had stopped to talk with Ruffcorn now hurried away to join his friends who were climbing up the Sentinel after the boy. He wanted to be in at the death of the Dwarf Demon.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the outlaw. "I must see the end of that imp's career, for he's but a minute more to live, curse him!"

Scarcely had the last word fallen from his lips when down from the clouds swept the great pet eagle of the boy, in answer to a shrill, quavering whistle from his little master's lips.

It hovered for a moment above the Sentinel, then, spreading its great wings it sailed slowly away, bearing with it the form of the boy!

A cry burst from Mabel Vane's lips.

"Curses, ten thousand curses!" hissed the outlaw, drawing his revolver. "That boy is possessed of the devil, true as God's in Heaven! Ah! they come this way—would to heaven I could put a bullet through both eagle and imp."

Straight toward the outlaw and maiden sailed the mighty bird with its human burden, while back on the summit of the Sentinel stood the defeated Indians in dumb astonishment and superstitious fear.

As the eagle approached the outlaw it gradually settled nearer the earth.

"Bang! bang!" went the robber's revolver; a number of feathers flew from the body of the bird, which uttered a fearful scream and settled with its burden almost at the feet of the outlaw's horse; then leaving its burden on the earth, it shot away upon whistling wings into the clouds.

Frightened by the report of its rider's revolver, by the scream of the eagle and the flapping of its wings, the outlaw's horse became frightened and reared and plunged so violently that Mabel was compelled to leap to the ground.

Before the outlaw could quiet his horse a pistol in the hand of Eagle Kit flashed before him and he fell dead with a bullet through his brain.

"Whoa, pony, whoa!" coaxed the boy, springing forward and grasping the reins of the now riderless horse.

After some efforts in which the brave, plucky little dwarf was roughly handled, he succeeded in quieting the animal.

"Now, Miss Maple!" he exclaimed, excitedly, glancing toward the Sentinel, "bounce on this critter and let's be off afore them blasted redskins come."

With the boy's assistance Mabel mounted the horse and gathered up the reins; then Eagle Kit climbed to a seat behind her and they rode away at a lively pace southward, leaving the howling savages far behind in a few minutes.

"Jollies!" exclaimed Kit as they dashed away. "I've not been follerin' that ole robber ever since he left the cave with you for nothin' have I, Miss Maple?"

"No, indeed, Kit; and I cannot express my feelings of thanks to you for your noble service in my behalf," replied the fair girl.

"That's all right, Miss Maple, that's all right."

Little more was said until they had traveled perhaps five miles, when Kit remarked:

"Miss Maple, I guess we're beyond danger now. I wish you'd stop the horse, for I feel awful sick."

"Why, Kit, is that so?"

Mabel glanced back at the boy. His face was as white as a sheet.

"I guess that outlaw's bullet hit me when he shot at me and old Whirlwind," he said.

Then he slid to the ground. Mabel saw that the breast of his tight-fitting jacket was saturated with blood.

"Oh, Kit!" she cried, "I am afraid you're hurt badly."

At this juncture a shout greeted their ears and turning their heads they saw three men approach over a swell in the prairie.

An exclamation of joy burst from the maiden's lips, for she recognized the party as Old Jack Drew, Nebraska Ned and her lover, Dick Rodman.

In a moment the three came up when Mabel greeted them all with a kiss of joy and delight, then called attention to her little rescuer's wounds.

The three advanced and shook hands with Kit, who was reclining upon a blanket taken from the outlaw's saddle by Mabel.

In a minute's time Old Jack Drew had removed the youth's coat and shirt, and upon the little frail body found a frightful wound.

The old man shook his head as he looked at his friends, and that simple movement of the head was fraught with a terrible meaning. It spoke plainer than words.

A dead silence followed.

"Mr. Drew," the brave little dwarf said, "I guess that was the boss shot for me, for I believe I'm goin' to die."

"Oh, no, no, Kit!" sobbed Mabel, "you will not die!"

"Well, if I do, tell Macomah to see that Whirlwind—"

"Kit, Macomah is dead," said Ned, though he regretted his words the moment he spoke.

"Macomah dead!" the little fellow cried starting up; then sinking back upon his blanket he sighed: "poor Macomah!"

Jack Drew went to work to dress the boy's wound the best he could, although he knew it would do no good.

A deep silence reigned while the old man was at work. Kit, after his wound was bandaged, fell into a sleep from which he finally started shouting:

"They are comin'! they're comin'!"

Then he snatched a whistle from his pocket and placing it to his lips blew a shrill, quavering call.

A shadow swept over the party and a drop of blood fell upon Mabel's little white hand.

Raising their eyes all beheld the great eagle, the pet of Eagle Kit, hovering just above them, the gray plumage on his breast red and dripping with blood.

The boy saw the bird which seemed afraid to come nearer.

"Whirlwind's hurt too," he said, "but then we saved Miss Maple."

He lifted his eyes to Mabel's, and putting out his hand to her said: "Maple, you've had lots of trouble lately but I hope you'll have no more. If you do, I can't help you, I'm going to die, I know. But I'm not afraid to die, for when I leave this world I'm goin' to Heaven, of which the missionary that used to visit us talked to me about so much. I'll not be a little dwarf up there but big like Ned and Dick; and then I'll meet my father and mother for I am told they were good Christians. But oh, how lonely it will be at the Erie for poor old Whirlwind—me and Macomah both gone away, and—"

The boy burst into tears.

Mabel sat down and wept bitterly.

The three men stood looking on the scene through a mist of tears, and a sad scene it was—the desolate plain, the dying boy, the silent weeping friends and the great eagle hovering in mid-air, as if to bear the spirit of its little master away on High.

Presently Kit rallied and calling Mabel to his side, put out his hand again, saying:

"Good-by, Mabel."

Then he turned to bid the others farewell, but his strength failed him, his hand fell at his side, the light of those big, bright eyes went out, and Eagle Kit was dead—the brave and manly spirit of the little dwarf had fled from its narrow tenement of clay and sought its Eternal Home.

Mabel buried her face in her hands and sobbed as though her heart would break. She had learned to love the brave and manly little boy with all the fond affection of a sister's love; and when she reflected that he had given his life for hers, the blow fell with all the greater severity upon her. All that she could do for the poor boy now was to cross his little hands over his breast, and murmur a prayer commending his soul to the great Giver of life.

With their knives and their hands a grave was hollowed out and the body, wrapped in a blanket, was laid away to rest there upon the great prairie, under the blue sky, the green grass and the waving wild flowers—the clay, as it fell upon the body, being moistened with the scalding tears of Mabel Vane and her three male friends.

When these last sad rites were performed, the party took up its solemn line of march for Honey Creek, and the great eagle hovering over the spot where it had heard its master's last call, rose in the air and wheeled off into the clouds.

Our four friends reached camp but a few hours behind the party that had gone on with Wild Cassandra and those wounded in the fight with the outlaws.

Doc Middleton had withdrawn from the siege of the camp, having no doubt learned of the death of most of his men in the mountains; but

unfortunately for the settlers and emigrants, this notorious outlaw leader was permitted to run at large and continue his depredations until the year of 1879, when he was finally captured in Northern Nebraska, somewhere.

For the next two days and nights, the villainy of Major Baron, the abduction of Mabel, the adventures of the party in the hills, the death of Eagle Kit, and the performances of Professor Jimrack and Judge Zelotes Prosper formed the general topics of conversation.

The two old detectives had no trouble in establishing the paternity of Wild Cassandra. Andre Markelle, her foster father, furnished sufficient evidence to prove that she was the daughter of John Henry Grayson; but the wild little maiden objected to leaving her foster father and mother and her western home to inherit her father's fortune. Nor were these alone her objections to leaving the West. She had plighted her love to Nebraska Ned, the gallant Boy Ranger, and he to her was more than all the wealth of Golconda would have been. It was arranged, however, that, whenever she reached her majority and demanded her inheritance it should be placed at her command.

The death of Dan Baron and the exposure of his deep-laid plans to possess Mabel Vane by foul means, when fair means had failed, so disgusted the gold-hunters with his promises—which all now saw was deception—and assurance of wealth in the Black Hills, that they resolved to go no further; and so they turned southward and finally settled in the fertile valley of the Niobrara.

Nebraska Ned and Dick Rodman remained with them until they had seen them safely and permanently located in their new homes, then they returned to their labors amid the wild excitement of mountain and prairie. Ned, however, makes frequent visits to the Agency and the home of Andre Markelle; while Dick Rodman as frequently has business at the settlement on the Niobrara where he always receives a warm welcome, especially from his betrothed, pretty Mabel Vane.

Old Jack Drew, being a member of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association, returned southwest to the fields of his labor, while Colonel Blower went east to finish up his business as administrator of the estate of John Henry Grayson. Before the old fellows parted, however, they arranged to meet in six months at Denver City, and from there make a trip north to the Black Hills and see what they could do toward ridding that section of outlaws and road-agents that had for over a year defied the Vigilants and military.

Old Jack's concluding remarks on the subject were as follows:

"If we git to 'bobbin' around' up in that Deadwood Destrict, colonel, we'll make 'em think a pair o' speckled alligators are loose among 'em, won't we? We'll clean 'em out quicker nor any hound pup has licked a skillet since the Ark swung over the mountains o' Asia Minor, won't we?"

"We, will," replied the colonel, "we will, by the sword of Damocles."

And it may be possible, kind reader, that we will follow those eccentric old detectives when they go upon that expedition, and if so, rest assured you will hear from them again.

THE END.

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